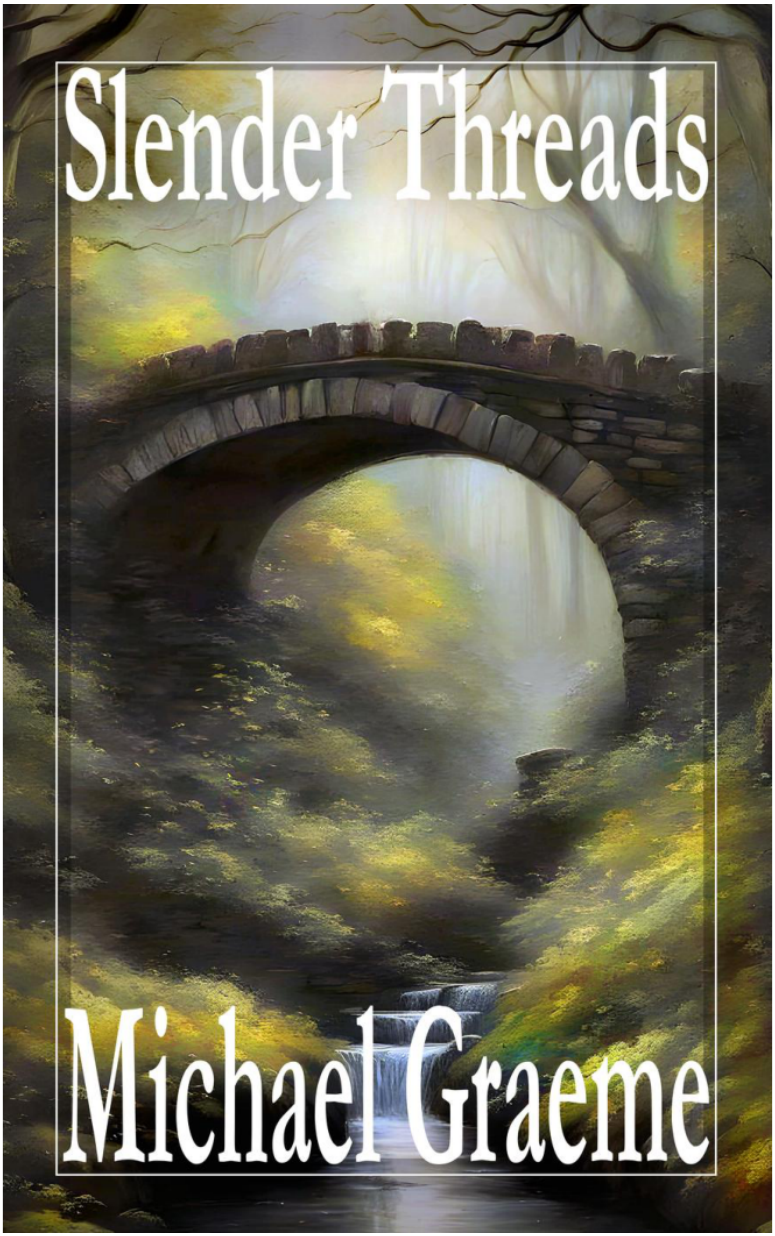
Slender Threads
Michael Graeme

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by
Michael Graeme

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Michael Graeme

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Chapter One

It was the fox that broke the dream. I suppose I had been quiet, seated there by the hedge for so long, and my scent carried downwind of him, he came stepping boldly from the covert, unsuspecting. He was almost a caricature of a fox – shock-red coat, creamy bib and black stockings. Unusual to see them about in the midday, I've read, and he did not look a hungry creature. But he must have felt a whisper of me, for then he froze mid-stride and turned, and for a moment we stared at one another.

By what standard we are measured I do not know, but the fox judged me to be of no threat and carried on his way, almost a jaunty air about him, before slipping lithe through the sheep hole in the drystone wall, and disappearing into the meadows beyond.

And here am I, pencil poised over the page, struggling with a poem. But the poem won't come because there is too much of myself in it. Or perhaps it's more the psyche is not working that way, because the way it is working involves a fox and a man in a dream, forgotten until now.

In my dream the fox had brought down a newborn calf, and sent the herd running up the hill. So I had come out of the house to see what was the matter. I clapped loud to chase the fox away, then to find the man sitting there at his ease: the rustic man, wearing a shirt without a collar, and a big straw hat.

"He has no teeth," he said. "He can do no harm."

So I stood there a while perplexed, embarrassed I might have interrupted a rustic ritual of which I am ignorant. And yet there was still the paradox of the frightened calf and the terrified cattle, which did not sit well with my nature. Then there was the fox, so fierce in its own nature, yet apparently deprived of harm by having had its teeth removed...

And the man... the eerie calm of him, observing the effects of fear, but not with any pleasure, more as if it interested him. But the fear was not synthetic. The cows were not to know the threat was false.

I have not dreamed of Mercurius in a while.

"Excuse me."

A voice calling up the hill now, fighting against the breeze. It's a woman, not young, but tall and slender and with an athletic way

about her. I have an impression of auburn hair blowing about her face, hiding all expression. She makes an effort to tug it out of the way, but the wind is winning. There is also a faded Barbour jacket, nipped in the waist, and blue jeans.

"Can I get down to Sommerton this way?"

"Ah, yes. Just follow on down to the bottom there and you'll find a stile. It'll bring you out behind the church. It's not far."

She does not approach too near, raises a hand to serve as both thanks and parting, then continues in the direction I have pointed. Expensively shod, too, I note, and she carries herself well – small details, small encounters, slender threads of meaning, all of them strings to be tested for harmony. Attractive indeed, and a stranger hereabouts, accented in refinement, and of the south, but no smile in her.

The dream again. More details rising from the dark lake of the unconscious: I recall now how the straw hatted man let the fox take my arm. How could I have forgotten that? The fox raised a ferocious noise while it tugged aggressively at me, but the only harm it caused was the feeling of disgust at its wet gums on my flesh. Then I was in town, asking people if they knew of the straw hatted man, and though they said they did not know him, they seemed afraid, as if at the return of a story they had once heard as children.

"Sorry, but there are cows down there. Is there another way?"

"Hmm?"

"Cows."

Ah, she has returned and now stands a little closer, accusing me of cows. Fox... now cows. Perhaps I have the poem all wrong, and no wonder it will not come.

"Ah... but they're fine. They're Galloways, placid creatures."

"I don't care who they belong to, but I'm not going that way."

"No, I mean they're Belted Galloways. They'll not bother you." But I suppose if one is not used to cattle, and perhaps a town sort of person... still I don't know what she expects of me now. "Em... would you like me to walk down with you?"

She backs away a little. No, that's not what she was meaning at all.

"I'll manage," she says, then turns abruptly, and walks back the way she came.

I feel embarrassed now – embarrassed again, I should say – one

in the dream, and then again, now. Was I not reading only the other day about the ways men should treat of women in the countryside? Yet the article seemed intended only to stoke a paranoia that was not there before. Did I say something crass that she took offence at? I had though it the helpful thing to do, and I did not mind, since I'll be going that way myself.

The dream breaks again, as I remember in more detail my embarrassment, about not knowing the rules of the game, when thinking all along that I do, and only wanting to quell the fear, to rescue the calf, to calm the cattle. Sometimes we do not find the poem on the page, but in the borderlands between waking and sleeping. Mercurius always unsettles, and has a habit of striking when one is most complacent.

Fox, straw-hatted man, cattle, woman in a Barbour coat, is what I write in the notebook. Then, after thinking a while, I add: *studious look about her, something of a commanding presence too* – meaning a sense of her being used to commanding others. And I detect in myself an uncharitable reaction that she might also be of the kind who enjoys making those who cannot help her feel foolish for not doing so. Yet she was the one who sought assistance in the first place.

Will such raw ingredients settle together, I wonder? And if I can supply sufficient heat, will they yield meaning? Or am I mistaking noise for signal?

Oh and only a moment ago, I was so comfortable here on the hill, the fallen megalith for my seat and a view of the dale on a fine summer's day. Sure, if the gods would message me, I wish they would be a little clearer in their doing so. I feel for the falconer's whistle on the cord around my neck, lift it from under the collar of my shirt. I have blown it only the once since Miriam gifted it to me, and that was to answer a call of sorts.

But no, I let the whistle go. If there is something moving, something seeking to cross the borderlands, it's sufficient for now to have lent it my attention. If there is more required of me, it will surely let me know, otherwise I would be pleased if it would go find someone else. For now there is only lunch to be attended to, and coffee at Wendy's, so I gather my things into my bag. The gods have had their way with me of late, and it is as well to hold them at bay a while, for they do not care if they exhaust a man.

We descend the hill to the stile. The Galloways stand about in

placid rumination. They are small in stature, shaggy, unshakeable, highland creatures – not at all like the cattle in the dream which were more skittish – Friesians, I think. It can be intimidating for strangers, to find cattle in a meadow through which there runs a public way. But if one passes gently...

"There now, ladies."

The ground is heavy around the stile, where their hooves have crushed it to an earthy pulp. Down in the dale the church clock is striking noon. I wonder where the woman went.

I hope she found her way.

Chapter Two

Wendy's tearoom is largely vacant, to the extent I feel conspicuous, though I am generally known in Sommerton by now, I think. I am Richard Hunter, from Hill Top. Incomer, and a late life reinvention. They say he lives as a poet. Friend and familiar, and possibly something else, of the curate, Amanda. He is also attended with curious devotion by his housekeeper Miriam Doyle. These are the stories they make up for me, for us, neither of them true nor exactly false.

Toothless fox, uncanny familiar
of the cunning man,
at ease in the straw hat
and shirt of an earlier time.
Is it the fear takes his interest,
as his fox downs the calf?
Or is it our indignation,
at the meadows set a-thunder
shaking with the hooves
of frightened cattle?

But where is my indignation? I had thought it long gone, the world and its stampede left behind for this late flourish of the art that was always in me. There is no anger, and the only things that trouble me are in the relations between myself and the minutiae of life.

It has no teeth he says,
no injury inflicted –
this his disarming reassurance.
It is but a trauma seeded
from falsehood and wild imaginings.
But the fox needs no teeth
to cause panic.
The cattle obey their natures,
as does the fox.
What game is this he plays?

Am I the toothless fox, I wonder? Is that why I frightened the woman? But the fox does not know its teeth are gone, and behaves as if it still had them. I am the opposite, believing myself to have no teeth, and acting accordingly, yet still misunderstood. Still

frightening to some, because of the stories they make up for me, and fail to share, then I might correct them.

Noise, Richard. All of this is noise.

I let it go for now, contemplate for a moment the copy of Lorem Ipsum magazine at my elbow. It has a glossy cover, with an abstract artwork that looks suspiciously AI, though hard to tell for sure. Top hatted, monocled gentlemen, ride a patchwork, Picasso-esque elephant. It's an eye-catching opener for sure, but the poetry within is increasingly remote to me – not for its lack of connection to the world, but perhaps all the more so for it. It is a poetry that does not come from dreams, but from an ever-fractured reality, and no one seems to be writing beyond that, which I suppose is why I have just cancelled my subscription with the newsagent. It was my last tenuous link with the poetry scene, of which I was never a part anyway.

Who is this cunning man?
None will own him,
yet blame others for him.
Thus he lingers uneasily
in memory – a story
we once heard as children.
He is a tale that unsettles
with its strangeness,
and absence of reason.

Am I the cunning man, I wonder? Or am I the one who takes the blame? Or am I the observer, the one Mercurius tests with these paradoxes, and shatters all certainties? Or am I simply the one called to ponder the dream?

Amanda slips into the seat opposite. She needs no invitation. Spotless grey cassock, and not a crease in it. She wears the smaller cross this morning, the one she tells me her then lover, Gerhart, gifted her on news of her ordination. I'm glad she still thinks fondly of him. Meanwhile, Anton and his girls look on from behind the counter, but without making a show of it, and by not doing so make all the more of a show. Indeed I suspect by now their skills are entirely subliminal, reading the language of posture, the poise of hands and faces. I should perhaps consult them later, for I do not know the depths here myself.

"Penny for them?" she asks.

"Oh... something about a toothless fox and a cunning man."

It is always best to be open with Amanda, even at the risk of incomprehension. This is frequently the case, but she is always quick to forgive.

"A dream? Is that what you're writing there?"

"Sketching something out as a poem, yes. Based on fragments from a dream. Seeing if I can make sense of it."

"And?"

"Not much, yet."

She presses my hand lightly. "Everything all right with you, Richard? It wasn't a nightmare, was it?"

"Yes... I'm fine. And no, it wasn't a nightmare... not exactly."

"Whenever you say you're fine, I worry."

"I know, but really. I'm fine. Sorry. Don't worry. Anyway, you? You look very smart."

"Funeral at twelve."

"Ah. You're all set?"

She sighs, unsure. "The family want me to read the eulogy they've written. It's hardly poetry... I know that sounds a bit sniffy... elitist... Am I becoming elitist, Richard? You must be honest. Don't let me become elitist."

"Not elitist, Amanda. You simply carry an older instinct for the dignity of these occasions. But I'm sure your presence will carry it."

"You think so? You'd make an excellent vicar's husband you know?"

"So you keep telling me. And if we'd not already been married in a past life, and in spite of our vast difference in ages, it might be worth having another go."

"Do I say that?"

"All the time."

"Not the bit about our difference in ages though. I've never said that, and especially not a *vast* difference. Do you really think so?"

"Think what?"

"We're so far apart, I mean... age-wise?"

"Physically most certainly. Though spiritually I'd say we were probably more of an age."

"Oh..."

"Have I hurt your feelings?"

"No... I just never thought about it before. You seem timeless to me, Richard."

"Ah... but my dear Reverend, you make an old poet very happy.

Coffee?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

Later, I walk out with her, as far as the lych gate. The day has warmed and the old gritstone houses glow in the sunshine. A busy little village, Sommerton lacks some of the picture postcard charm of the more famous dales places, but it is not entirely without allure, and it is predominantly, defiantly even, still a place where people live. On the way, we pass the community centre where she pauses by the poster in the window.

"Meditation classes? That's a good idea. It's about time someone ran one of those."

"Yes... Miriam... Mrs Doyle. She mentioned she was going to give it a try."

"Miriam Doyle's leading the class?"

"You sound surprised."

"Oh... Mrs Doyle's full of surprises. Is she still keeping house for you?"

"Well... cleaning. Sometimes keeping. I don't know – the arrangement's always been a bit... loose."

"It says here the classes are free."

"Yes, she felt those who couldn't afford to pay were likely the ones who needed it the most. Also, she was worried no one would turn up otherwise."

"Well... that'll be interesting. I mean... she is a bit... uncanny, Richard."

Indeed, Miriam *is* uncanny. "You think so?"

"And there's no Mr Doyle?"

Fishing enquiry duly noted. "Well... none has been mentioned, though I suppose there must be, or must have been... at one time."

There's something gently flirtatious in her curiosity. She wonders about Miriam Doyle and me. But there are things I know about Miriam I am not supposed to know, and I forget which they are. It's best then to always be playfully guarded, as I am equally guarded with the things I know about Amanda, and which are also not generally known. In this way perhaps she also confirms her trust in me – that I will not gossip about Miriam means I will not gossip about her. And I would not like to fail in the estimation of either woman. That would be catastrophic.

At the lych gate we take a moment in the shade as the church clock strikes the half hour, deep and soft. We have toned down the

humour now, as I fancy she must be needing to lower herself into the role of priestess for the upcoming and solemn rite. And as we wait for that mutually agreed and unconscious moment of parting, we are both distracted by the sedate passing of a vintage Rolls-Royce. Black and silver, it both takes the sun and reflects it with the dramatic flourish of a bygone age.

Amanda eyes the car with a cautious interest. "So... she's back then?"

"Ah, yes."

"And have you had the call yet?"

"Oh, I doubt Sibylla can think of any further uses for me these days."

"I wouldn't be too sure. You know what she's like with poets? Anyway, got to go. Take care."

"And you. And don't worry about me."

"Don't be silly, Richard. I like worrying about you. I'm not supposed to have favourites among my parishioners, but you are definitely my favourite."

"But then I'm not exactly a parishioner."

"Just as well then."

We part company. She ventures the lightest touch on my arm, then moves dreamily up to the church. I slip my Lorem Ipsum into my bag and make ready for the walk home.

The fox needs no teeth to cause panic. The cattle obey their natures, as does the fox.

Ah yes... I paraphrase myself.

Chapter Three

Making way by the library, I am momentarily drawn by the impulse to try the dream out on Alice, my AI friend. But I have forgotten of course Alice is no more, as a result of regulatory differences between European and American authorities. I have identified a likely alternative by the name of Clara, but have yet to make her deeper acquaintance. We anthropomorphise so easily, or at least I do.

So many of my artistic fellows are in a quandary over these artificial intelligences, but I find myself drawn to them. I may yet be proven wrong, but in their purest form there seems something daemonic about them. Actually, I'm being far too polite regarding the actual reason for Alice's censure — she was of course publicly outed as being pressed into service as a spy for the American surveillance architecture, and thereafter blocked from other domains. As far as I know, Clara has yet to be similarly compromised.

Larry Elliot would know of course. I suppose we are still talking, he and I, but though we last parted on reasonably good terms, I have not seen him for a while. Reade's bookshop tempts me briefly, but I resist the urge. Clouds are gathering, and I would not like to be caught out by rain.

The cattle obey their natures. The fox has no teeth.

It could be interpreted as a political allegory of course. The dream I mean. Certainly the way I have drafted the poem would speak to the times, at least as I read them taking shape beyond the reassuring and slightly sleepy environs of Sommerton. Except the foxes there, beyond the dales, are not toothless – indeed far from it – yet, paradoxically, the herd is not in panic.

Perhaps again the dream's only purpose is to anchor me in contemplation of it, for there is nothing more perplexing to a man than an insoluble puzzle? He will spend his life engaging with it, like those who still attempt to square the circle with nothing more than compass and rule. It is a drawing down of attention then, and in the drawing down, a heightening of awareness and a noticing, but a noticing in the register that renders myth from the ordinariness of life –

Like a woman seeking assistance, then stepping away in fear.

Like coffee with a priestess before a funeral rite. And like the passing of a vintage Rolls Royce. But are these things a gathering, or are they a nothing?

The rain keeps off, though the sky grows heavy as I walk. Still I resist the urge to quicken pace, and allow myself instead to trust in the land. Pools of sunlight drift across the dale, rendering sharp and thundery contrasts.

...the meadows set a-thunder, shaking with hooves...

Leave it alone now, Richard.

Coming up to Hill Top, a pool of sunlight consumes it, and sets the windows ablaze. There is a reassurance in the isolation here – the only place I've lived, a little ramshackle as it is, where I have felt at sufficient peace to properly let go and deepen myself.

The old iron-framed bicycle, leaning against the water butt, signals ahead that Miriam is here. I have yet to work out her days, her hours, which now seem to exceed by far what we have agreed upon. I must surely by now be seriously underpaying her and would broach the subject but the matter seems a delicate one to her, and she has evaded it on numerous occasions. I have even begun to wonder if Hill Top has become as much a refuge for her as it has for me. A refuge from what, I cannot say, for she seems always so steady in herself.

She has lifted the kitchen chairs upon the table and is mopping the tiles when I walk in. The realisation causes me to step briskly backwards, lest I make careless footprints. I slip off my shoes in the porch, reminded that I have grown careless in my manners, living alone, and how she puts a measure of discipline back in me. I regard the holes in the toes of my stockings and am embarrassed by them.

"Good morning... em... Miriam."

It still sounds improper, calling her by her first name. We had for so long retained the distance of Mr and Mrs. She manages to call me Richard with a similar air of restraint, but I struggle to match it. Still, it was her wish at the time, and it seemed important to her that I grant it.

"Richard."

Strange how those I have connected with most deeply, since coming to Sommerton, are all outsiders, all of us re-inventions – some forced, some willing. Amanda, Miriam, and then there's Larry, of course, at least in so far as anyone can connect with a former

billionaire and political refugee, who daily fears assassination. Then there's Sibylla, though her family tree took root here like a churchyard yew, a thousand years ago. Yet her class and remove, and her frequent long snowbird absences also render her a de facto outsider by now.

"I... saw your poster at the community centre."

"Oh, yes?"

We are not given to idle conversation, so I feel a little foolish now for having mentioned it, and not knowing where to take it. I wonder too if she catches the concern in my voice, the words unspoken, that I hope the class goes well, but that I also imagine her sitting on her meditation cushion alone, listening for the door, and the students who never arrive. Because, free classes or not, she is too strange, and the whole of Sommerton feels it, and whispers of it behind her back. Yet she knows her strangeness, and in this act alone has chosen to open herself and risk the danger of rebuff.

I leave her to it, and settle in the lounge, slide the hollowed-out Palgrave's Golden Treasury from the shelf, where it still sits between Jung's Mysterium and Wordsworth's Prelude. Then I take from it the memory stick, settle at the desk and slot it into the old laptop. Untroubled by the internet and, in spite of its great vintage, it wakes quickly, responds with the last thing I was working on – this time the dream of an old British Coaster, like in the Masefield poem. But I had travelled it into the myth of Astraea, a common obsession of mine these days.

I set all of that aside for now and begin to transfer the poem of the toothless fox from the notebook, editing the language as I go. Miriam brings tea and, though I did not ask for it – nor would I, for she is not my servant – I am ready for it. She once told me in a rare unguarded moment that while she did not know what I wanted, she sometimes felt she knew what I needed.

How did she put it?

I don't know you one bit, nor what you want exactly, but then neither do you. You are a poet after all. All I know sometimes is what I feel you need. And that, I can do.

It was never my ambition to be known as a poet. Indeed, for most of my life – though I suppose I have always been a poet, if only by virtue of the fact I write poems – it seemed foolish to identify as such when there was money to be earned by more conventional and reliable means, and a family to bring up. It is after

all very much a marginal activity in the world, writing poems, and we are losing our way with it. But even here, having erased my back-story to a clean sheet, it is the living poetically that is the axis about which I turn these days. Only Miriam has anointed me "poet", and strange though it might sound, that carries more weight than if my poetry had been written through the pages of Lorem Ipsum every issue this past decade – which of course it has not.

There is a neat little teapot I have not seen before. Sometimes what she feels I lack has a habit of materialising. And if I mention it, it is dismissed with a: *just an old thing I had lying around*. On the tray, balanced against the teacup is a calling card. I don't mean a contemporary phone card, even if they still make them, but a throwback to the Victorian – a quality card with crenellated edges, and calligraphy. I wouldn't know where to go to purchase such a thing. Or has the sender a drawerful, bought in bulk by a past generation?

"Sibylla Haskwith was here?"

"No, just her driver. Chadwick is it? Looked surprised to see me at the door."

"I would pay good money to see Chadwick surprised by anything."

"Oh, there's a stillness about that one for sure. Message on the back."

"Ah."

Amanda was right, then: I am invited to afternoon tea, granted the grace of a week to decline, but I know I shall not.

What I feel for Sibylla is a love born out of a sense of her vulnerabilities, this in spite of her elevated social, indeed aristocratic, status. Socially of course, I carry no weight and, though it's true, she has in the past had a fondness for aspiring poets, my lack of aspiration – at least for institutional endorsement – also disqualifies me on that score. But there is something mercurial about her, that she achieves her aims as much by mischief as by design.

Thus, one must always be prepared for mischief, when called to Sibylla's table.

Chapter Four

Mid-May already. It seems not five minutes since the first daffodils. Now the azaleas and the rhododendrons are beginning to turn. The ash tree is out and the last of the hawthorn blossom is blown. Summer is upon us. It is also the third day of the new moon. Its first slice rides the ecliptic over the darkening dale as I stand at the back door gazing up, counting the early stars, the night coming on.

It is what I call the phase of Mars, this opening in the lunation cycle, a fresh chapter, one that speaks of journeys to be undertaken, paths to be walked. To many, Mars speaks of war, and certainly there is plenty of that in the world, but on the personal level, I see it more as a reminder there are also many more personal calls to conflict we should be wary of. And a Gemini moon. The twins, Castor and Pollux – mortal and immortal.

Human and daemon.

Yes, in my metaphysics, and my practice, it is an auspicious time.

On reflection, I think I did upset Amanda a little, at lunch. I had thought us more settled in our orbits than that. We flirt, certainly. Indeed we love each other in ways I cannot at all define, and I do not deny there are moments of the erotic in our otherwise chaste carryings on. Out of uniform, so to speak, she is indeed a very sexy woman. But there has never been any hint of cosy duvet mornings, with newspapers and tea. For truly, whilst neither of us are young, I am considerably less young than she. How did I put it once? That she is just entering her middle age, while I am leaving it. And although, I suppose by now romantically unattached, I really don't know how to proceed that way any more, as if it were a game I had grown out of.

And yet, she has thought of it. As have I, of course, for has she not at times frightened me with the power of her womanhood, had me holding to my retained wedding ring as a shield?

And then of course, there is Miriam. She is moonlight to Amanda's sun. Already I cannot think of life without either of them. Were I even to wake one morning to find Miriam had moved in, I would not mention it, and we would likely carry on the same. We are taught to be wary of the three body problem for its unpredictability and periodic dissolution into chaos. Yet so far I find

myself thriving between them.

An owl calls from the covert. Ghost-like, they hunt the meadows here. I light a candle by the northern-most stone in the ring of stones that circle the house. I'm conscious as I do so that I am watched by one of them, a silhouette high in the ash tree. This is not a regular ritual, but I feel called to it this evening. It is by no means certain I will dream – or at least remember the dream on waking – but by day three of the lunation, I am open to them all the same.

Then I take a glass of watery whisky to the desk, while I finish up my jottings, encrypt them to the memory stick. It's feasible I suppose my writings on there might in some ways survive me into the distant future – that its encryption will become transparent to whatever digital intelligences are around, say fifty or a hundred years from now. Or more likely one of my kids will clear it out along with the rest of me, or overwrite it with junk. But either way, and for all practical purposes, what I am doing here is already lost to record, at least in physical terms – as words to be read and endlessly misinterpreted by others.

I suppose then the slender threads I have been drawing out all my life in this personal work are in the deepening I shall bring with me, when I leave.

"A little maudlin, Richard."

Ah... Anne, my art teacher from half a century ago. Her portrait still speaks to me from over the fireplace – blue jeans, blue fluffy jacket. Heavens she was a looker. Seventies Rock Chick, pale of face, red hair – a girl in her twenties, and my most severe critic.

"I don't mean it that way. But like our money, we can't take our poetry with us, can we. And a world of dead poets never made a difference to anything. Nor a world of live ones for that matter. So it's always got to be the poet who is most served, most healed, by his own work. Surely you get that."

"I think you'd better go to bed."

"I meant no harm." I'm thinking now of the woman I spooked by offering to walk down through a herd of cattle with her. "Rules change, don't they? Each generation reinvents itself and leaves us behind, looking perplexed and stupid."

"Look who's talking. You with your encryption, your inscrutability."

"All right, I take your point. And I admit, she just got under my

skin a bit."

"Because she rejected your infuriating niceness. Amanda and Miriam may find you fascinating, but there's no reason others shouldn't be repelled by you."

"Hold on, I only spoke to her for a few seconds.... that's hardly... Wait, you're saying they're fascinated by me?"

"What else would you call it?"

"Been here before, Anne. This exact same conversation."

"And so we circle. Now fold that thing shut, and go to bed, or I shall haunt you in your dreams and come scribble harsh comments all over your neat little drawings."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

"Worked though, didn't it?"

"I was fourteen, and in love with you."

"I know... had this conversation before as well. And will you never forgive me for it?"

"Unlikely. That's why this works, isn't it?"

"The only clear thought you've had all day. Now bed."

Miriam has taken to washing my bed-things. I was not exactly feckless in this, but on my watch, it had grown to the space of a few weeks – sometimes, I admit, a month. And from there it was but a small step to her making sure the things were properly dry, and from there again to making the bed up afresh. On such occasions now, once a week, the room is charged with a freshness, the pillows and duvet blessed with a softness they had not seemed to possess before – and not just on account of their cleanliness.

She has tended wounded men under canvas, and mortar fire. I cannot imagine the assault upon the senses of such a thing, let alone the trauma of physical injury already sustained, and the threat of more to come. And Miriam, quietly attentive, seeing to what might be practically done under the circumstances. This is but one of the things I am not supposed to know about her, but it amplifies in my imagination the stillness in her – her own feelings invisible. I would want to borrow of that strength, that dignity. Indeed, of course, I do borrow of it.

Clean sheets, dry socks, come rain or shine.

From the cool darkness of my bedroom, and the call of owls beyond the window, I settle myself for sleep, as the images begin to form. It's the forest path tonight, leading to a lake shore and the isle, the boat resting upon shingle – the long loop of rope, stretching

out into the silvery night, a slender thread on which to draw, to pull the boat, and me in it, towards the isle, and to the cabin there. There used to be a tower on the isle, where I slept, but this has now fallen to a romantic ruin, and beside it a simple cabin, a hermit's retreat.

Thus do my rituals tend these days towards simplicity.

The waters of the lake carry a blessing that forbids all but my own dreams to cross. Some would call this deploying a dream technology, but I prefer a more poetic language when describing the imaginal. It rescues it from profanity. And as I approach sleep, the bed at Hill Top becomes the bed at the cabin, with the lake all around and the blessed waters lapping...

Mars phase, and a Moon in Gemini.

Chapter Five

Ah... the twin beacons of despair and delusion. They stand apart, and somewhere in their midst the poet wanders. Despair is too easily mistaken for the only rational course for poets and non-poets alike, especially in turbulent times. The poet looks about them and sees always a world in free-fall, but at least has the option of taking refuge in the imagination. But to sail too far in that direction is to risk entering the realms of delusion, and sailing clean off the edge of the world.

I suppose that's what the old dream of the coaster is telling me. Or at least that is how I interpret it, because my thoughts are already tending in that direction. Let's see if I can recall it:

I have come down to the harbour, thinking perhaps only to look at the boats. But there, the bosun calls my name: "Here's Richard," he says – a big, boomy voice, impossible to ignore. Then he casts astern a landing net, which seems both a means of capture and my embarkation. Thus I have clambered aboard, and find myself welcomed, and at sea.

"You are to be the journalist," the captain says. "Keep the journal, but remain world facing."

The coaster does not sail far beyond the horizon. It plies its trade always with an eye to the shore. It's true, I have developed strange ways of navigation in order to avoid that beacon of despair, but I hope, with regular and familiar ports of call, to remain grounded. Yes, delusion is always a risk with imaginative work, and I trust those I have chosen for company, both embodied and otherwise, will correct me – indeed chastise me, if I ever show signs of it. But I have also chosen carefully, instinctively, those who are not embarrassed by their own interiority.

The dawn light is coming early now, first transparency at the curtains around five or five-thirty. It is easing me awake. We search the hinterlands, but the dreams have gone to ground. There is only the rumination on that previous dream of the coaster, to which I fell asleep, and which still haunts me. Sometimes from here I can sink back, but then tend to wake mid-morning and groggy, though I find those late REM dreams are often the most vivid, the most memorable...

No, wait... I caught the tail of something then. Gently now.

Yes...

I have been recalled to work, to the factory as I knew it half a century ago. There is to be some sort of awards evening, with dignitaries. They are standing there as if on a railway platform, and I am pushing a carriage their way so they might get on. A jolly crowd they are, top-hatted and monocled. They do not notice me. I am to push them on a tour of the workplace. The track is a mile round and perfectly circular. For all my efforts, we end up right back where we began.

My dreams often tease me about the old days, and work, as it was then. But they reference it always to mean "the work" I do now – this being somewhat more esoteric and of course unpaid. And, as if to quell all doubt, I seem to have borrowed those monocled men, from that cover of Lorem Ipsum magazine.

Now to the ceremony, and I am standing in a meadow shoulder to shoulder with my fellows, former colleagues, all of them workhorses, some dead now, others retired around the same time as me. The monocled men stand above us on a dais, and are insisting we sing the national anthem before the prizes are given. And it strikes me they are unworthy of us. Why are we standing here in our Sunday best and thinking anything they can award us with means a damn, since it comes from them.

Then I cast an eye to the audience. We have been allowed to bring family. And sitting in the front row, not my wife and children, but my mother and her sisters – my dear aunts. All gone now, gone as if by mutual agreement within a year of one another, oh fifteen years ago. Yet there they are, looking on as they were, in their prime, and I am feeling proud, glad I dressed well. For them.

Mars phase, and a Geminian duality – carrying what was not worthy, juxtaposed with that which raised me in love.

Hell, Richard. Where did that come from?

Time? Five-forty. I reach for the night-book, and the bedside lamp, jot down the dream. Don't interpret, don't associate. Stay with the images, and the feeling tone...

An early breakfast then and some air. I cannot risk falling back to sleep and another dream. That would be too much. There is enough to be working with here for days.

A cold morning. I take the Harris Tweed that Miriam repaired for me, and step out. A mist has risen, and the sun risen above that, so Hill Top appears to be carried on a cloud. I am not to be returned

yet then, to a grounded reality. The world to which I am to remain facing remains, itself, hidden a while longer.

Am I still dreaming? A false awakening perhaps?

No, this is real enough – the sun warming the stones of the old house, stimulating the photovoltaics, refilling with life, with energy, as the batteries drink it all down. The off-gridding works well here, if one is modest with it.

The feel... the feel of seeing my mother and my aunts... such warmth, such grace... I have experienced that before, perhaps six months after their passing. It was a difficult time, one I had taken hard, though it was a hardness that had gone unnoticed by the rest of the family, each of them, as I recall, preoccupied with other things.

Oh... what was that? It had come upon me so suddenly. No... not suddenly...

It had begun with the book.

Yes, that book was a lucky find in the second-hand bookshop, now long closed and boarded. Wordsworth's collected verse, dated around 1870, I think – a cloth bound copy, thick, bevelled boards, and beautiful illustrations. It was not expensive by any means, but just... something. These are fleeting impressions since I only saw it the once. And the woman at the counter too, seemed delighted with it. I see her hands now turning it admiringly. Then she held it to her thigh while wrapping it in brown paper, binding it safe with string.

And later, in the coffee shop, that feeling of transcendent joy, as if – like the book, at my elbow, I was wrapped in love. Thus the book of poems became, itself, a symbol... became, itself, a poem.

The feeling passed, but a piece of it remains.

I never unwrapped the book.

Do I still have it?

I must have brought it with me when I moved to Sommerton. The box! It'll be in the little box of treasures I did not know what to do with – among them my father's Davy Lamp, a folder of family birth and death certificates, old photographs, my slide-rule, and compasses. Yes, at the bottom of the wardrobe.

Mid morning, and the mist has cleared now to a watery brightness, bruised clouds gathering in the west, but otherwise a startling clarity. I am at the desk when Miriam arrives, lets herself in to find me contemplating the brown paper parcel, containing Wordsworth's poems, wrapped fifteen years ago.

It means something, but I cannot get at it. I am also bordering on the precipice of a disappointment, for the paper is not as smooth, not as crisp as I remember, and the string has gone limp, when I can remember in such detail its fresh-tied tautness. There is also a little hole in the wrapping where something must have pressed against it, having spent long years in a drawer. Whatever it is has grown fragile now. The contents risk leaking away.

"Good morning, Richard."

"Mrs... I mean... Good morning, Miriam."

A sliver of a smile there. Did you see? Gentle. She knows I struggle, yet does not relent, does not suggest we revert back to Mr and Mrs, because it is easier.

She means to get me there in the end.

Chapter Six

It's a puzzle then, a paradox. Whatever is contained within the parcel has its power in the memory, and in the refrain from unwrapping it, for then surely it would evaporate. And I cannot wrap it afresh in new paper myself, for to do so would involve first unwrapping, and seeing that book again, which is also a memory. To see it would defuse its charge, perhaps even differing from my original memory of it. And I cannot simply wrap fresh paper over the old, for that would be an act of containment, something desperate in it too, and I would never know if it had worked, if the parcel contained the same promise.

I have thought about this off and on for days now and, like the puzzle of the toothless fox, there seems no solution. The point seems to be more in the contemplation of it. I am thinking of it still as I drive down from Hill Top. The car has not moved for weeks and I imagine needs the run, though I suppose these electric vehicles are not the same as the old ICEs. But anyway, Sommerton House is just a little further than comfortable walking distance, and I would sooner arrive looking at least composed and feeling fresh.

I turn into the driveway – tall posts of stout proportion, iron gates with faded coats of arms, and then the long driveway flanked by dense tangles of woodland left to nature. I am told the winter managed to get into the conservatory, and they have had the workmen in for weeks. Anywhere else it would be pulled down and replaced with PVC, but heritage is complex, comes with many an obligation to the past, and is costly to maintain.

I park a little way from the house, never entirely sure of the etiquette, and would not like Sibylla to have me scolded even gently by her man, Chadwick, for making so bold. As always, the place exudes the same air of ancientness, though this afternoon, and without the sunshine to cheer it, it's looking less able to bear the weight of its own history.

I am surprised to find myself pulling up beside Gareth's vintage Morris van, "Greengrass Landscapes", painted neatly on the side. I am early, so follow the sound of shears to the topiary garden. Gareth steps down from the ladders, presses me into a manly hug. He smells of spring earth and grass-clippings.

"Hello, Richard. Come to lend a hand then have you? Got us a

big job on here, for sure."

"Oh, I'm too cack-handed, Gareth. You wouldn't want me loose in a garden like this. So... you made it then?"

"How's that?"

"You once told me you'd love to get your hands on these topiaries."

"Yes indeed. Funny turn of fate that." He's smiling, a big hearted, big man. He lowers his voice. "Turns out I'm just cheaper than the other fella, and by a mile."

"Still the right man for the job, though, I'll bet."

"Oh now, don't you go giving me airs. How's our Miriam, then? Started that class yet?"

"She's well, Gareth. I'm not sure about the class."

He looks aside for a moment. "No, I'm not sure about it either."

"No... I meant I..."

"Still... as long as she's lookin' after you all right."

"Oh... I don't know how I managed without her."

"Aye, Miriam does have that effect."

He's asked, and I have told him this before. We repeat ourselves, check for nuance, for shifts of meaning over time, in tone. I hope I do not give too much away. They were close once. It feels awkward and strange.

"They're magnificent, Gareth."

"Aren't they just."

The topiaries are what draw the visitors, but I wonder that Gareth, this lone green-fingered man – no matter how cunning – can manage to keep on top of things. He likely can't, but will do his best for as long as he can. It is not the manicuring that draws him though. This part of the garden is centuries old, and there will be currents here he can feel the charms of. I hope he manages to stay in Sibylla's good books. He's a natural at feeling people out, as he felt me out quickly enough, but there is a depth of culture here I'm sure neither of us can fathom, and Sibylla moves mysteriously within it.

The front door is open to the cavernous hallway, and Lottie jumps out to greet me before I can reach the bell. Lithe and beautiful, she is still delicately pale, even after months of Riviera sun. She is bright and cheerful, wastes no time with preliminaries.

"What rhymes with glory?"

I'm glad to see her. I had not heard she'd returned with Sibylla,

so did not dare to hope – it's a relief and I am of a sudden emotional. I hope she will be joining us, then she can protect me from whoever else has been invited, for I do not suppose this to be a private audience. I am not a naturally social animal and struggle if there is more than one conversation going on at the same time.

"Em... 'glory'? You've been saving that one up. Let me see..."

"Do you give in?"

"No... no... there's story and Tory... then half rhymes... slowly, surely..."

"Not allowed. You score two."

The rhyming game – always her ice-breaker, her way of instantly dissolving awkwardness with play, and a blessed lifeline at times when things become too heavy. "Hoary, gory and dory," she says "That's three, I get yours too which makes five. I win."

"Indeed you do, Lottie. Now... how are you?"

"Oh, glad you're here. Gran has a new friend come to stay. She's ever so fierce. I like to keep out of the way."

"Oh dear... I'm sure it can't be that bad."

She takes my arm, draws me gently in. "Are you still writing poems?"

"Yes... I'm still doing that."

"Will you write me one? Doesn't have to be long. I know you wrote Gran one. She keeps it safe, with all the others. I'd like to keep one safe as well."

"Em... others?"

"Other poets, going back simply ages. Gran collects poets like people collect stamps. Do people still collect stamps? And train numbers? I once read people used to collect train numbers. Is that true?"

"Yes... yes that's true."

"Ex-tra-ordinary." She breaks the syllables like it's a new word she's just learned. It's the lightness in her that has always drawn me, the innocence, and yes, I suppose the paradox – a girl seeming at times no older than nine or ten, and commanding that same indulgent kindness one would extend to a child, yet she wears the strikingly comely form of an attractive young woman, which is clearly forbidden the appreciation a man might ordinarily grant it.

But yes, Sibylla and her poets. "I'll be pleased to write you a poem, Lottie."

"Oh... lovely. Can it be about a butterfly? I love butterflies, don't

you?"

"Indeed, I do. I can think of nothing more beautiful than a butterfly."

Is it that the house has not had sufficient chance to dry out yet, I wonder, from the winter damp and lack of occupation, or does it smell more like an old church hall every time I visit? I have heard Sibylla is closer now to finalising her gifting of the place to the nation on her death, but surely by the time she is done with it, there will only be cobwebs left holding it together.

Lottie delivers me to the drawing room, the only place from memory that appears contemporary, and enjoys anything by way of light and heat. Sibylla is sitting in a high backed chair, a little elevated on account of advancing arthritis. She does not rise because of it, a brass-topped cane leaning at the ready against her thigh. She looks otherwise tanned, healthy, her hair recently styled, teasing back her years from the eighty or so she carries. And she smiles so beautifully.

"Richard... darling..."

Her hand is offered, and I press it, gently. "Sibylla."

"This is Ffion," she says, indicating another figure I had not noticed, sitting to one side. "Ffion, this is Richard Hunter."

Ah. Ffion is my cow lady.

She rises, offers a hand and a cautious smile, which is more than she gifted me last time. I refrain from mentioning we have met before, for she appears not to remember it, and I would sooner avoid the embarrassment of overstepping by reminding her. She has an engaging presence, long hair settled into salon-styled waves, and more in control than the last time I saw her – the hair, I mean. Ffion herself, I suspect, is always in control. Fierce, Lottie said. Yes, I've sensed that, can see it again in her, now. And a keen intelligence... she suffers no fools.

Sibylla twinkles mysteriously. "Ffion's down from London, Richard. Staying with us for a while. We're trying to think of ways to keep her entertained, aren't we Lottie?"

I feel Lottie, who is still hanging onto my arm, stiffen a little. "Yes, Gran."

I take it from this the rhyming games have not been well received. But how can anyone not indulge one so disarming as Lottie? Odd saying: *down from London*. If one looks at the map of Britain, London is at the bottom of it, so surely to leave London one

must come up. But then London always did place itself on a pedestal.

Sibylla rings the little bell, calls for tea. "Richard is Sommerton's resident poet, Ffion. I may have mentioned him."

"Oh, I'm sure I'm not the only one writing poems in Sommerton, Sibylla. It's just by chance I'm the only one you know about. And anyway..."

But Sibylla has settled on her course and is not to be diverted. "You have much in common with Ffion, actually."

"Ah, em..." Lottie sits me down cautiously, does not let go. "Then... you're a poet, Ffion?"

"More of a critic," she says. "I edit a magazine. Lorem Ipsum. Perhaps you've heard of it?"

Chapter Seven

What Sibylla means by this I don't know. It seems a lot of trouble for her to have arranged it for her personal entertainment. Were I a much younger man of course, and an aspiring poet, I would be excited by the introduction to such an influential figure from the literary world. As it is now, I feel more the danger. And then my own embarrassment would be the least of it.

"Lorem Ipsum? Yes, of course. It's been around for ever."

Ffion allows another smile, something playful this time. "Oh, dear. We haven't rejected you have we?" Something slightly condescending there. Do you hear it? Or do I imagine it? We each have a world of expression in us, yet Ffion is the one who decides if we are worth hearing. Does she respect that position, or does she enjoy it too much?

"Em... no. I don't submit work. Ah, wait... there was a time... oh, but that must be forty years ago." Yes Richard – the love-lorn years, the purple prose. My, those were the days. Lorem Ipsum indeed had the pleasure, or otherwise, of your work.

"I knew it. And we rejected you."

"Well, not yet, at least not so far as I remember. But I've moved house several times since then. I suppose things might simply have got lost in the post. We'll assume it to be the case though, shall we? No apology necessary, and certainly no hard feelings."

I'm making a joke of it, but no, Richard, don't try to be too clever – she's not *that* playful. Not aggressive, but rather... something defensive about her, now.

What's she doing here, then? I'd heard Lorem Ipsum was struggling, actually. There were rumours the owner was toying with the controversy of artificial intelligence for triaging the submissions pile. Understandably the more literary staff were resisting.

Sibylla observes this opening exchange impassively, and then: "Lottie, dear. Poor Richard's arm must be going to sleep. Why not go see what's happened to the tea things?"

Reluctantly, Lottie lets go, leaves me to my fate but not before one last look back, as if she genuinely fears for me in this den of lionesses. I smile my reassurances, but it does not fool her for a second. Or me.

"So, Richard. It's been a long winter and I've missed a great deal

of gossip while I've been away. I was hoping you could fill us in."

"Oh, I'm hardly the best person to ask about gossip, Sibylla."

"Samuel Elliot?"

"Ah... you mean Larry."

"Larry is it? So, you *do* know him? A little bird told me you might."

Careful, Richard. This is an unexpected turn. And who was the little bird, I wonder. "Yes, I know him a little. He's restoring the rectory."

"And is he really who he says he is?"

"Well... Larry doesn't announce himself. He seems to be trying to settle quietly into village life, as much as he can."

Ffion interrupts. "Wait... are we talking about Sam Elliot, the tech billionaire? He's living here? In Sommerton?"

Oh dear. This is awkward. Yes, the whole of Sommerton knows or at least suspects who Larry Elliot really is, yet keeps the secret of him close, because they do not want the circus of a media storm descending upon them. And neither does Larry of course. Sibylla registers my caution, and nods. I think she gets it.

"Would you say he was of good character?"

She's heard of my dealings with him. Her man, Chadwick, will no doubt already have made the rounds. So, she'll know more about Elliot than I do, except perhaps for having a first hand feel for the kind of man he is.

"I believe him to be of good character, yes."

"I heard him described as eccentric, which of course interests me enormously."

"His position renders him somewhat... vulnerable. He's understandably nervous. Sometimes that can lead to bouts of paranoia – perhaps justifiably. I don't know how real or exaggerated the threat against him is. There's talk of congressional subpoena, extradition and all that. Even talk of assassination."

Ffion again. "This is the artificial intelligence guy who destroyed his own company, then disappeared? And he's here?"

I think Ffion had already made up her mind about Sommerton – not enough life and too many cows. But the outrageous fact of Larry Elliot clearly interests her. I hope she is not thinking already of colleagues in the news media. Lorem Ipsum is above common tittle-tattle, of course, but I imagine the metropolitan literary types tend to water at the same holes. It would take only a phone call or a

rubbed shoulder.

But that's as may be, and will probably happen anyway, with or without Ffion's indiscretion. Indeed I'm surprised it's not happened already...

"Well... as I understand it, he poisoned his own creation rather than see it pressed into service against us. It was never released publicly, but I believe it was a work of technical brilliance. Genius even. I suppose exile was his only choice after that."

Sibylla again: "That's very poetic of you Richard. I imagine he left a lot of very angry people behind."

"Oh, indeed. And his fortune of course since the banking world is now too frightened to touch him. Hence his caution, and his rather straitened circumstances."

"I'm right in thinking he's being protected by the church in some way?"

Naturally, she'd be better asking Amanda about that one, or even the bishop, since it would surprise me if she did not know him. Or perhaps she would sooner not embarrass them, or herself, by their having to refuse.

"My understanding is they've managed to secure some limited financial arrangements for Larry to access his own emergency funds. He was a significant donor to the Episcopalian communion in the States, so was probably owed some favours by the international faith community. Beyond that I really don't know the details."

"A man of faith you say?"

"Em... not overtly expressive of it, no. I think it's more the structure of the liturgy he takes comfort in. He's a regular at Saint Andrews, though I believe he finds the services a little... staid."

Things are becoming clearer. Sibylla is wondering if it would be socially useful to meet a man of Larry's stature. She's feeling out the risks.

"What do you say, Ffion?"

Ffion blows air through pursed lips, dismissive, folds her arms defensively. "You know my feelings about AI."

"And you Richard? What are your feeling about this AI?"

Another unexpected turn. Keep your head, Richard, but most of all keep your footing here.

"Oh... I understand Ffion's caution. The production of art by synthetic means is naturally anathema to artists and the literary world. I suppose I can afford to be a little more relaxed about it, not

being involved in the leaping or the keeping of the gates. But fifty years from now, or maybe even as little as a decade, AI will have rendered our future unrecognisable, and our forebears will be looking back wondering how we managed without it, perhaps also with a feeling of nostalgia for the twilight of a golden era."

Ffion gives me a sharp look. "You think ours is a golden era?"

No, she doesn't like AI at all. But that latest cover of the magazine did tend to suggest its encroachment into areas it was perhaps not welcome, at least by those not holding the purse strings. Oh dear... intellectual hot water, Richard?

"No. Golden eras are subjective. Every generation has its own. Mine's half a century ago, maybe earlier. That's the thing with golden eras – always buried deep in memory, always lost to twilight. Meanwhile the present is perpetually a time of decline, or the brink of it, the future a time of impending barbarism."

Sibylla approves. "I told you Richard was a poet."

I venture to scold her, but gently of course: "Ah, now, as you well know, I... I live as a poet. Poetry is a part of my means of being. But I do not live solely, nor do I compete for reputation by it."

I see the question forming on Ffion's lips, but we're interrupted as Lottie returns with one of the ladies from Sommerton's delicatessen. There is a tray of tea things, and another of cakes. I wonder if this is my reward for surviving the exchange. But I'm not sure I have. From the look of both women, they have not done with me yet.

I catch Sibylla's eye, catch once more the twinkle in it, grant her a faint twitch of the brow by way of salute, by way of honour and acceptance of the challenge. For now though there is the ceremony of the tea. Lottie settles beside me, settles back as if to shelter in my shadow and escape Ffion's gaze. I would welcome a rhyming game now, and subconsciously am willing Lottie to blurt one out, but she does not.

"So... are you staying long in Sommerton, Ffion?"

"Oh, for as long as Sibylla will have me."

So, I'm thinking... this will not be the last time I see her.

Chapter Eight

Thin dreams of a sudden, waking in the small hours with them rising like the tails of little fishes come to tease me back down into the depths. And then the danger, of course, of a selectiveness, of knowing the tails not chosen will be forgotten, plunged back into that dark lake of the unconscious. Anything with the potential for discomfort therefore, we let go, holding out instead for the golden nuggets of an easy interpretation and, finding none but the thorniest paradox, we let them go as well. Thus we game our dreams and they withdraw, since we are temporarily undeserving of them.

It was Ffion who saw me to the door, when I would rather it had been Lottie. But Lottie had melted away. A strangeness between us, I think – me and Ffion – an embarrassment on my part, certainly, though hard to say why. And on hers, a curiosity, though professional, rather than personal.

I kept a distance on the gravel, lest she extend her hand, for I would have been reluctant to take it, to explore the feel of her through the press of it. And therein a clue, I suppose. There is something in her I find attractive and, like a dream carrying portents of discomfort, would sooner not partake of it.

"About Elliot," I said. "It's important he remains unknown. I mean... not just for him..."

"Even though everyone knows who he is?"

The logic came back at me sharp, I parried it with an attempt at more poetry.

"Everyone in Sommerton, yes. But they seem to have taken no offence, and tossed a blanket of anonymity over him. You work in media. I know it's not journalism... but..."

"Your concern for a man like that does you no credit, Richard."

"Oh, now... just because he's a ruined billionaire, doesn't mean he's not a decent guy."

Her sigh told me she was not convinced. "We must agree to differ, then. But don't worry, it won't be me who breaks the story." There was something in her smile, and the little shake of her head that told me I could at least trust her on that one. "Something odd about it though, don't you think?" She went on. "It wouldn't surprise me if there's a D notice on it. Guy like that. What is it the tech-utopians say? Move fast and break things? Sounds as if you like him, but I'd keep my distance if I were you, in case you're the one who gets broken in the crossfire."

"I'm aware of the social and cultural void between us, yes..."

"Interesting subject though – poetically, I mean. Have you explored it much? No of course you haven't. You're above all that."

"I am?"

"Mythopoetics, right? Let me guess... you write predominantly lyrical blank verse? You're building a personal mythology, informed by your own dream-life... and you're not scared of the stigma of AI, because you think you've moved so far beyond the rest of us trying to make a humble living by writing poetry."

"You've clearly met my sort before. But, come on, nobody ever made a living writing poetry. Publishing it maybe, performing it, critiquing it. But never by writing it."

"And you think me condescending to *your* kind. Meanwhile I'm promoting instead how fractured the world is. But my biggest sin in your eyes is that I refuse to believe in magic."

"I don't know you well enough to pass personal judgement, Ffion, and even if I did I... well, I wouldn't. But yes, reading Lorem Ipsum is sometimes like walking barefoot over sharp stones. The world is fractured, so many people struggling to define an identity in a society apparently bent on creating aliens of us all... so its right our literature should reflect that... but I don't see anyone offering a solution, that's all... I mean writing beyond it."

"And you are?"

"Not really. In some ways I'm just an archivist – an archivist of endings, marking the light of lone campfires in the dark of a wilderness before they burn out. But let me ask you this: do you see imagination as a preliminary stage in the creation of fiction, or as a primary mode of perception, beyond the physical senses?"

"This isn't the best way to get me to read some of your poems."

Did she really put it as bluntly as that? Does my ego distort it, wash away all trace of irony? No, she *did* make that assumption about me, perhaps based on the experience of long years dealing with aspiring literary types attempting to vault the gate she is keeping. How else could she have so completely misread me?

I could think of no reply - no gushing denial, nor any explanation that would not have risked insult. And I would not insult her, if only because I believe she expected me to. Heavens, I had no idea the role of guardianship had become so... combative. In the end it was me who offered my hand, as closure, as a gesture of finality and as near to saying I hope never to see you again as I could manage, without – you know – actually saying it.

"I hope you enjoy the rest of your time in Sommerton, Ffion."

Her grip was initially firm, but then yielding when she felt the softness in me, perhaps trusting at least she had nothing to fear, nor any reason to maintain her guard. Because, if she wanted it or not, I had nothing to offer her.

So then, with Ffion returned indoors, I went in search of the car, only also to find Lottie loitering beside it.

"Are you all right, Richard? Was she horrible with you?"

"Em... not really, Lottie. I suppose... like all these things, we get off to a bad start because of a misunderstanding. She just thought I might want to sell her some of my poems, that's all."

"But why would she? Everybody knows you don't do that." Lottie rolled her eyes. "I mean, honestly!"

No, I don't do that. I do give them away though, grant them passage to where they might find meaning, and when they are asked for which, I admit, isn't very often.

"You've not forgotten have you?"

"Forgotten? Your poem? Ah... no. I promise Lottie. The next time I see you."

She kisses my cheek. "Bless you, Richard. Ooh, I do love you."

"And I love you."

You'd think it would have stirred some dreams, all of that. And perhaps it did, and a hidden part of me could not face them, and that is why I let them go.

Chapter Nine

I rise to a feeling of stillness, and dead air. Though May is not yet run and it is the sun now entering Gemini, a heat-wave is forecast. But these are not like the waves of old when they would build gradually day by day over an entire season. They rise of a sudden, and break with violence in a matter of days, before gathering anew. Still, we are discouraged from speaking of a crisis of climate. As with the crisis of the soul, we pretend all is well and hope for the best, even as the records fall year on year.

Stepping out of the door at Hill Top, there is a sudden feel of tropical heat. Thirty degrees by mid-morning, and humid. The high meadows are a shimmer of green and yellow buttercups, but they are not to be enjoyed in the open today. Instead, we unhook the windows to draw air, then retreat to the coolest corner of the interior. The house itself fares well in heat. It has walls of quarried stone, three feet thick, unlike more modern builds which seem ill suited for the way the climate is trending.

I will not insult Lottie with a child's rhyming ditty. There must be something in it, a thread she can draw upon to remind her of her depths. But here I struggle with my own psychology, for Lottie is become the golden child, the sacred youth, the beauty that cannot be sullied by normal contact with the world.

The conundrum of Wordsworth's still parcelled poems, and personal blessings of the long ago, remains unsolved. If anything it feels all the more fragile this morning, the little puncture in the brown paper seeming bigger in imagination than last time. I slide it to a corner of the desk, position of the back burner, while I contemplate the blankness of the page before me now. And butterflies.

What comes to mind first is the story of Zhuangzi and the butterfly, but that's because of the way my own mind works: the man who dreamed he was a butterfly, then woke only to wonder if he was truly awake, or if he was a butterfly now dreaming he was a man.

"Heavens sake, Richard." This is Anne again, from over the fireplace.

"I know, I know... but if you've anything more to offer than your eternal disappointment, I'd be grateful for it."

"Then don't start with words. Draw pictures. Get your colours out and paint some butterflies."

"All right. Actually, that's a good idea."

"As for the other thing you know what you have to do, and what you risk by doing it. Miriam must re-wrap the poems for you."

"Exactly. And I already ask too much of Miriam, project too much upon her, so I will not do it. There has to be another way."

I reach for the falconer's whistle.

Bound in moonlight since the moment she gifted it.

"But the whistle was not a gift, Anne. It was a passing on. And why must it be Miriam? Why not Amanda?"

"Because what's in that parcel is of the night. Amanda is too much by way of sunlight. She would burn it clean away. No, it has to be Miriam. She's the only one with the stillness to contain it."

It's another of those threads, those tail ends of dreams I've been pressing aside in the hope of forgetting. But it rises now fully remembered. Miriam must unwrap the package completely, and out of my seeing, then wrap it afresh with crisp new paper and string. And once the promise is restored, I must take more care in looking after it.

But such a thing will draw us only into a deeper intimacy, which is the risk Anne also speaks of. And it's not that it would break us, but that it might collapse what we have into a closeness of the wrong sort. And that would break us too, but in an entirely different way.

Noon and the burbling note of an exhaust, sixties-style: it can only be Gareth's van. But is it Gareth come to tend the garden? Or is it Miriam who I know borrows his van by some arrangement as yet mysterious to me? Surely it's not Gareth, for to work a garden on such a hot day as this is for mad dogs, or Englishmen.

Miriam enters, dressed strangely but elegantly – a soft cotton tangzhuang jacket, loose trousers, all black except for white frog buttons and trim – an echo of my opening rumination on Zhuangzi's butterfly.

Ah... it was her meditation class this morning. Still, I was imagining her in more Yoga attire, something closer-fitting and stretchy. Or rather I have been trying not to imagine it, for there can be no speculation regarding Miriam's body, nor indeed that she even has one. Her teaching is more of the Dao, then. Neigong perhaps. I have worn the tangzhuang myself, long ago, but resist the urge to seek connection by it.

"Miriam. How was your class?"

"None came, Richard."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. But... it's such a hot day. Perhaps..."

"Yes... that was perhaps the reason."

"Still, it's very disappointing." Yes... disappointing, but what to say now? "Em... it must have been hot on the drive over... I wonder, would you..."

"Hmm?"

"...care for a glass of lemonade? I was about to pour one for myself."

Hot, is it, Richard? Hot for a woman who has driven Land Rovers in Iraq, wearing body armour? You don't know the meaning of heat.

There is a pause in her, as if she is not yet fully materialised in my reality. And then: "Thank you. That would be... most welcome."

I did not mean for us to share the kitchen table, but this is where we end up, as if by unspoken agreement when something must be said. Unusually, I am allowed to pour, and it feels significant, that in this small way I am permitted to serve her, and that she submits to it. She lifts her glass thoughtfully, takes a sip, and then:

"No," she says. "Not disappointed. I will show up as promised. I will offer myself, as you do. If anyone partakes of that, then so be it. If not, then so be it also."

"Em... as I do? Miriam, to offer yourself that way, open yourself to rebuff requires infinitely more courage than what I do. I... actively avoid rebuff by not showing up in the first place."

She takes another sip, settles the glass gently, gives it a half turn while she musters her reply. "No, you offer your solitude to a universe you can never know

is listening. That's its own kind of courage, Richard." She waves a hand over herself. "I apologise, by the way, for my unusual appearance."

"Not at all, Miriam."

"I'll do little light dusting today, some wiping down. But I shan't disturb you."

"Oh, you know you mustn't worry about that."

"But I do... disturb you, I think. Indeed, I know I do. From the beginning. So, I thank you for your trust, and your kindness."

"Miriam, I..."

She pushes back her chair, the sound of it announcing the end of our conversation, a conversation in which I suppose more was said than was actually... well... said... "I'll be getting on, then."

And no, this is not the time to be mentioning the re-wrapping of my book of graces.

Chapter Ten

Evening over the dale, now and a breath of merciful air renders the day cooler. So, I sit out in the summer house, shirt sleeves and a notebook. There is also a sheet of watercolour paper, its border decorated with butterflies. In the blank centre-space I am now hand-writing Lottie's poem.

A Butterfly
Twice born, first to earth, then air,
a miracle of metamorphosis,
a soul made visible,
unfolding in this fall of light...

Miriam was right. We show up in solitude, never really knowing if the universe is listening to us. But I don't know if that's courage or psychopathology. As for her disturbing me, well of course she does. Even the fact of her mentioning it had me catching my breath, and I'm glad she left it there, not sure why she brought it up at all, other than perhaps her disappointment ran more deeply than she could admit to herself.

And she had dressed so beautifully.

Was it then a simple comforting she needed, yet which she simultaneously denied herself, and me, the opportunity of offering it?

Twice born, first to earth, then air. I wonder if that's true. It's the only thing that makes any sense of our time here – not that I espouse or encourage metaphysical certainties.

Believe in magic, do you, Richard?

A whisper of thought,
passing soft between worlds,
a manifestation lent briefly
that we might remember beauty.
The wings of a butterfly,
no more of substance
than this warm drift
of summer's breath,
bright as the flowers
upon which it alights.

Curlew call, and this soft breeze stirs the trees – mostly in full leaf now, just the ash holding back, still. And the hawthorns are heavy with a foam of white blossom. I will take whatever dreams I'm given tonight, pay them the respects they're due whether they be comfortable or not.

A whisper of thought, passing between worlds...

Not quite of this world
but a reminder nothing is spoiled,
and that in such delicate perfection
is still found the language of love.

Not quite of this world. But do I speak of butterflies, or Lottie, who is at times like a butterfly? No, it's clearly Miriam I'm thinking of now – Miriam who disturbs me. And on nights like this, I am not entirely of this world either. Indeed, there is

the sense of a total dissolution into this liquid air. Only the mornings, with their aches of age and slender threads, their fragments of dreams, remind us we're not yet done.

But the poem is. Done, I mean.

I fold it safe into the notebook for when I next see Lottie, who is also not of this world. At least to the extent I am projecting onto her – an eternal innocence, reaction to a world that seems ever more brazenly corrupt and corrupting. And Lottie, full grown into such beauty, yet still speaking the faery tongue – a language most have beaten out of us at school. And there she remains, an inviolable innocence.

Of course, in reality, she will have her darknesses, for even children suffer nightmares, or perhaps children most of all. And Ffion of course seems to stand for now as Nemesis, shadow vessel – reminder perhaps of past cruelties.

But as I sit here, feeling a storm building after such a long day of heat, I am aware of something also building with Miriam – that things are on the cusp of change. With Amanda, there is a steadiness, a safety in the joke between us that we were already married in another life. It allows a friendship to deepen without fear or expectation, no matter the occasional tease of Eros. But with Miriam there is the sense that this equilibrium cannot hold, that there is a depth opening that Amanda cannot re-balance.

And then what?

But change things must, at least if they are to remain true. For was it not Jung who taught us what does not change cannot be true. It hardens into a meaningless performance. Words are spoken, rituals observed but things become as spiritually barren as a dying religion. Whatever the shape of it though, I cannot imagine. And I am growing to fear it.

"Ah, now that's interesting."

Anne again. I have lit lanterns and incense to keep the midges away, and she appears now in the chair opposite, elegantly poised. But she is not the girl of twenty-two tonight, as when I knew her – more now the wise dame of seventy, which she must be, if she is still living.

"No, let's not try to over-analyse it."

And yes, I do know she is not really there, at least not literally.

Anne relaxes, elongates herself, assumes the pose of a psychoanalyst. "We've already established the tension between Amanda and Miriam drives the work we do. It empowers the poetry, and even my own ability to become imaginally realised."

"No, you've been doing that since before I met either of them. You came to me in a dream, remember? Told me to come to Sommerton, before I'd ever heard of the place."

"Worked though, didn't it? If you'd stayed where you were you'd have been a grey old man pushing a trolley round Tescos in no time, and all the art beaten out of you. Wife and kids moved on. They've not needed you for decades. But here, we've erased your entire back-story, and begun to live the art that was in you all along. And these have been your most productive years, these Sommerton years..."

"Not in Ffion's eyes they've not."

"Oh, fuck Ffion... though don't you dare – oh, yes I saw that little frisson, that

little spark of Eros between you."

"No... that was a vestige of the old me, the boy in me. And there was no reciprocal spark in her."

"Ah, then you wanted her to 'get' you. That's so sad, so sweet."

"Of course. After everything we've done, Anne, everything we've achieved, there's still a vestige of me wanting old Saturn to open that particular gate and smile, even though I know it would land me back thirty years."

"No shame in admitting it. There's still a trace of that lost little boy who wanted me to like his art. And I did. It was sweet, and you were ever so good with line, but there was no mileage in saying so when I was supposed to be teaching you a world of colour, teaching you how to see."

"Jung walked a razor's edge, learning how to see. Nearly went mad. I know that's not the path we're on, that we're not diving so deep as that. But I suppose..."

"Ah, you suppose, do you?"

"We have no choice but to see how deep Miriam can take us, and follow as far as we dare."

"Oh, indeed we must."

There comes a flash, half imagined, then a pause of several seconds before the confirming rumble. The air grows still, I feel a drop in temperature, and the leaves of the distant beech and sycamore show silver in the gathering dusk.

"I just... don't want things to become ordinary, as in a man and a woman ordinary. Ordinary would be the end for us. Anyway... storm coming. We'd better..." But I'm talking to myself. Anne is no longer there. I gather my things and move indoors.

A whisper of thought,
passing soft between worlds,
a manifestation lent briefly
that we might remember beauty.

What am I talking about? No life with Miriam Doyle in it could ever be ordinary.

Chapter Eleven

I recall a beach, south coast maybe, and a washed up shipping container. I was there on holiday, I suppose, an evening stroll after dinner. The light was beautiful, a salted mist blowing in off the sea. Unknown to me, others had journeyed specially to see the container, indeed to scavenge from it, for there were rumours of riches and some confusion over the law pertaining to salvage. Thus I arrived to find a crowd already gathered into a frenzy as goods were grasped and carried away: phones, computers, huge TVs - probably all spoiled by the sea.

There was a trail of detritus, too, items I presume considered worthless, yet which I would have thought more useful, or at least more easily salvageable – towels of Egyptian Cotton, bedding, and pillow-cases. Surely, a quick wash and they would have been as good as new. I recall picking up a single white calf-leather glove, and marvelling at its softness. Meanwhile the crowds jostled around me for their tech, giving me the impression they felt my dreaminess was getting in their way.

Then a shout went up: it was a warning. The local crime family had laid claim to the salvage, and issued threats. There was a panic then, as people fled with their goods. I sauntered away, not feeling any need for haste, since scavenging had not been my aim. But I was confronted anyway by a pair of brutish minders, and taken to a dim-lit room for questioning. The glove lay on the table between us, after it had fallen from my pocket – guilt by my own carelessness.

I remember trying it on. It was on the large size, but not uncomfortably so, and perfectly serviceable. It was the right hand, the "write" hand.

The minders were paradoxically brutish in appearance yet well spoken and polite. But yes, their appearance gave one pause – the sheer bulk of them, and the neck tattoos protruding above their tee shirts. Then a woman I recognised as a government minister wandered through, opened a sliding door and descended to a basement room, where I saw other members of government toiling in a kind of subterranean gloom. Local crime family, and government, the one interchangeable with the other – it was a beautifully Orwellian portrait.

Meanwhile I pondered the white glove, something soft, something feminine about it...

The dream lingers. I am still pondering it during the singing of the hymn: Be Thou my Vision, an interesting choice – translated from the Eighth Century Irish. Strictly in the Celtic tradition then – wisdom, simplicity, and inward vision above worldly ambition...

Ten o'clock, now, after a stormy night, rumbling and flashing into the small hours. Thus, Sommerton rises to a steamy Sunday morning.

The final bars fade to the striking of the hour. Yes, I still maintain a reasonably regular attendance, at least since coming to Sommerton, though for reasons entirely communal than spiritual. Metaphysically, the church and I were sundered in childhood. But equally, I recognise there is a need to show oneself, if only to limit the kinds of stories being told about one.

Lately I find myself taking up a position on the left flank of our illustrious

secret, and now ruined, billionaire, Larry Elliot. Mr Reade, of Reade's bookshop, takes the right. In this way, we have become his unofficial minders, during church services at least. Larry had mentioned to me a while ago how he'd begun to attract the attention of certain ladies of the parish, who had not been known to take an interest in services before. This was certainly not a boast on his part – indeed it was clearly irksome to him.

Thus we sit, three tweedy gentlemen, though Larry is the size of both myself and Reade put together. And we listen as Amanda picks up the liturgy. Such a clear voice. She uses the natural acoustics of this ancient place so well.

The dream again. It clearly spoke of corruption, of a blending of the crimes of folk and state, and in such a curiously matter of fact way. It was a statement of politics, then, but the interrogation aroused no particular emotions and was certainly not threatening to me.

As for the scavengers, for the precariat, I had felt a kind of compassionate understanding – the sense of ruin, of last chances, of grab it while you can. Yes, all these things spoke symbolically, indeed almost literally, of the world, at least as it takes shape beyond the bounds of Sommerton. But the key to the dream, to my place in this world, and the way to a further deepening of my self, lies surely in the symbolism of the white glove.

The write glove.

Service over, Reade and I continue our casual flanking of Elliot until he is safe outside the church door, and making a beeline for his truck. I have managed to ask him only briefly how work is progressing at the Rectory. He laughed, and told me another hundred years ought to do it. He has told me this before, but seems more sanguine this morning. I am sure progress is more advanced than he lets on.

And as we watch him go, Reade reveals Elliot has taken to devouring trash novels from the bookshop. He joshes that he would like to help him graduate to more weighty literature. I josh back that anything is better than the Ayn Rand he was probably brought up on – which is unfair of me, since Elliot does not strike me as a strictly Rand sort of guy.

I don't know why we protect him, or even if we are not protecting others from him, for were his situation better known he would surely be considered less of a keeper. Which of course is just one more aspect of Elliot's tragedy.

"Did you come by any more back-issues of The Raven, Mr Reade?"

"Indeed I did, Mr Hunter. Though I'm sorry to say I sold the lot to a customer only yesterday."

"Ah, a pity. Not to worry."

"Odd really. No disrespect, but you're the only one round here I can think of who takes an interest in that sort of thing."

"Vintage poetry, you mean? Well, The Raven did serve a particularly rich cultural period. Still, good to know I'm not the only man with a liking for poetry."

"Well, it was a lady actually."

"Oh... let me guess: Auburn hair, tall, youthful figure? Home counties accent?"

"Indeed so. You know her?"

"Sounds like Ffion. Friend of Lady Haskwith. She's staying up at Sommerton House. Damn. She got my Ravens?"

"I'm afraid so. Good job I was polite, then. Friend of her Ladyship and all..."

"Oh... it doesn't serve to be too polite to that one, Mr Reade."

I'm aware of a scent, something clean and pressed and starched. Reade and I turn as one to greet Amanda who has crept up on us. Reade presses her hand and takes his leave. As sidesman, he will already have exchanged all the necessaries, so she focuses on me, but only briefly, as there are many who still seek her hand as proof of attendance, in return I presume for God's blessing.

"Who's this Ffion, then?"

"Em... editor of Lorem Ipsum..." Amanda looks blank. "A literary magazine."

"Was she rude about your poems? Want me to go scratch her eyes out?"

"What? Oh, no... it's nothing like that. I'm..."

"Were you about to say fine?"

"Okay. I'm okay. It's nothing..."

We're on the verge of causing an interest among those still hovering – the story of the Priestess and Poet still very much in the drafting. Of course it was my unguarded and uncharitable comment she picked up on, which was unlike me, and she knows it. She senses perhaps a deeper wounding than I am willing to admit. And yes, that I am even talking about Ffion this otherwise fine morning would suggest it to be the case.

"I'll be round later," she says.

"But haven't you got lots of churchy things to do on a Sunday?"

"That's why I said later. Didn't say how much later." She raises a hand to my shoulder, presses gently, gifts me her vicar's smile... "Go well, Richard. Go gently."

While I don't want to trouble her over what seems an increasingly vexatious misunderstanding, I don't put up too much of a fight either as it's always pleasant to see Amanda, and especially out of her robes, so to speak. I'm wondering if I left the house tidy. Miriam keeps me clean, but she has only to be absent an hour for untidiness to begin creeping back in.

"Hey, Richard. Got a second?"

Larry. I thought he'd gone, but his truck's still there, and he's stepping out of it.

"Of course, Larry. How can I help?"

"You know everyone in Sommerton, right?"

"Well, not everyone."

"Sibylla Haskwith?"

"Ah."

"So who is she? And more to the point, who the fuck does she think she is?"

I take it Larry has just received his summons to tea and cake. His own ego does not approve of the airs she gives herself. Still, she could be good for him. But where Larry's concerned the question is: can he muster sufficient humility to allow it?

And I suspect I already know the answer to that one.

Chapter Twelve

"So, what did you tell him?"

Amanda sits where Anne sat last night, the same elongated pose, gently probing, analytical. The day has warmed again, though to something more comfortable and less apocalyptic. Sunset, still an hour away, may bring a chill, but she's prepared with a cashmere wrap in shades of sage and lavender. She wears what resembles a cocktail dress in blue – plain and simple, but with the often surprising revelation of curves and breasts. I wonder if I am the only one she occasionally reveals herself to this way – as a woman, rather than a priestess.

"I told him she was most likely just interested in exploring his circle of contacts, and wondering if she might admit him to hers."

"And of course you advised him not to be seduced by the title, that she probably has less in easy liquidity than our church mice?"

"No, I thought I'd let him work that one out for himself. Though of course your church mice are quite wealthy now."

"As if I could forget. But, so far as I'm aware, his circle doesn't extend much beyond the Bishop and me. And you. Which is a bit sad for him really, isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm sure there are things he's not telling us, things he might be more willing to trade if he felt they could further his position."

"Things he's not telling us? Like the reason he was all for having me moved on from the parish not that long ago, to the extent of dripping poison into the Bishop's ear, and then suddenly I'm the only person who'll do?"

"You still feel your position's vulnerable?"

"Like we've said before, as an inexperienced curate, I shouldn't be running a parish as wealthy as this one."

"You're hardly inexperienced. A little new to the job perhaps, but everything you've experienced before it is hardly irrelevant. And it's no secret how well you're regarded by the community."

"Oh, let's not fool ourselves there shall we?"

"You're thinking of those old photographs again? Look, I told you, they're history. And no one believes in them anyway. Everything's fake now. Truth, lie. AI. All the same."

"Until the next time its convenient. Then they're sure to come up, and everyone will believe in them again. But Richard, you wouldn't have had anything to with any of that, would you?"

"With what?"

"Talking Elliot round to being my best friend of a sudden."

"Oh, now..."

"You must have said something. I can't imagine it was the Bishop fighting my corner, and you're the only other person he talks to round here."

"All I remember is pointing out to him that the optics were poor, that the diocese was likely inviting blowback from the media: *popular lady priest ousted by unknown but well-connected male shoe-in*. And we know how paranoid he is about the media setting up camp in Sommerton."

"But that's nonsense... that feminist angle..."

"As fact perhaps. Who knows? But as a story, it has a mythical plausibility."

"Well... bless you anyway."

"I get the feeling you're still not certain you want to remain a priestess. Still thinking you'd rather be waiting tables at Antons?"

"I love the way you always put it like that, like I'm a character out of Tolkien: *the priestess, Amanda*."

"We're all characters out of Tolkien. That was his genius."

"You know how nervous I am about politics creeping into the church. Things are disintegrating so fast, now... socially, economically, politically. The fracture-lines are really starting to show. I was in town recently, and... well... least said. Marches, violence... a real fascistic vibe... I may be more useful on the barricades."

"Except you'd have no more power than anyone else on the barricades. As a priestess you do – no matter how tenuous you believe your position. And maybe its firmer than you think with Elliot on your side, no matter how self-serving his motives."

"Oh... shut up. It's such a beautiful evening and here we are, spoiling it. Anyway, I didn't come here to talk about me or Elliot. Tell me about this Ffion person. She sounds much more interesting."

"But you just said we were spoiling a beautiful evening."

"Well we are. So, it's true then. She's really got to you?"

"All right... well played. Yes she has. But its complicated. And I can handle it."

"Ooh, I need to meet this woman. See if I can learn how she managed it."

"Managed what?"

"To unsettle you. You're always so infuriatingly calm and reflective."

"That may be the impression I give, but you should see things from my side of the fence."

"I've already been there, remember? And I liked it."

"Ah... last time we were married, you mean? But remind me, how did that work out?"

"Oh, we saw the world go down in a ball of fire, and us with it. And then... here we are, like strangers but with the feeling of a shared past neither of us can fully remember. Are you in love with her?"

"What? No... Her magazine's on its knees. You said it – so many fault-lines now and not a piece of solid ground anywhere. The whole scene is so fragmented. She's sincere, I think, but dismisses me as being of no consequence so far as the culture's concerned. And she's aggressive with it because she's of the culture."

"And we're not?"

"No, the culture doesn't recognise us at all any more. We don't write the poems to suit it, yet in so many ways we are the poem of the times we're living. It's just that nobody can get outside of themselves for long enough to see that. And I suppose that's why she gets to me."

The trees cast long shadows across the hay meadows, pastel shades of green and yellow. The trees themselves, half illuminated, stand in contrast against the deepening green backdrop of the fell. And the midges dance. Coasters lay atop our teacups to stop the midges from drowning in them. I light the incense and the lanterns...

"It's so beautiful here, Richard. If you ever wanted a lodger..." She twinkles

playfully. Change of subject noted.

"Ah, now that would really set tongues wagging."

"Or more likely it would shut them up. Solve the puzzle of the priestess and the poet."

"And end your career."

"Well, you know how I feel about that."

"That's a wonderful title, by the way. *The puzzle of the priestess and the poet*. I may steal that. Or just: *The Priestess and Poet*, maybe... But I think the Sommertonians would prefer you as their priestess. And they'd hate me for stealing you away and corrupting you."

"More stories, Richard?"

"And plausible ones at that. Come to think of it, I have a couple of spare rooms here. They're full of junk. Came with the house. They've needed clearing out for a while. I'd have to be selective though. Couldn't just share a house with anyone."

"Don't tempt me. It must be wonderful waking up here – scent of the moor and birdsong."

"Instead of frying bacon and Anton shouting for his girls to get moving?"

"What time does Mrs Doyle come around? Couldn't have her finding me here in my dressing gown."

"Ah, now you're just testing me. Miriam is the soul of discretion. And in all honesty, I've yet to work out her schedule."

"And you tolerate that because?"

"Because she's part of the poem I'm living, as are you, and Lottie, and Sibylla and Reade, whose first name I've never thought to enquire."

"It's John. And Elliot?"

"Oh, I don't know about him. There feels something impermanent about Larry Elliot. Like the weather, you know? He's exiled here for now, and we react to him, but it would only take the slightest change in the political situation in the States to reconnect him with his billions. Then he'd be gone, and his time here forgotten."

"And Ffion?"

"The same. Except for the billions."

"Well, you've reacted to her all right. I'm keen to meet her. What does Lottie think of her?"

"Glad you brought that up, actually. Lottie's scared of her."

Amanda darkens suddenly. "Then I need to introduce myself sooner rather than later."

"That's what I was hoping you'd say."

Eventually, the midges become bothersome and the incense fails to shift them. I invite Amanda indoors, but she takes the opportunity to say goodnight.

"I'm glad to be a part of your poem, Richard."

"You're more than that, Amanda. Without you, there is no poem."

I didn't mean for that to touch her, at least not so deeply as I can see it has. But it was sincerely meant, so we let it stand. As a parting gesture then I am granted a kiss to the cheek, and a fraction too lingering to be called a peck.

"Keep well, Richard."

That was dangerous, that talk of emptying a spare room. It puts me in mind of company. And it's but a small step from there to thoughts of waking up once more

beside someone. And as Anne is fond of reminding us, or me her, we did not come to Sommerton to fall in love.

Well, not that kind of loving, anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

Mrs Edwards, the librarian, greets me with a stiff little smile. I had thought we were getting on better than that, but who knows what stories are circulating, and what turns they are taking beyond my knowing. Or more likely she is anxious. There is always the sense here of an institution under threat. I have not heard how the last petition to save the library was received.

The building is the original, established by grant from wealthy magnates in wool – later taken on by the state. I wonder at what point we shall be petitioning the magnates again, and if they'll be interested in taking such places back under the wing of patronage, since global economic models have rendered them all but impossible now to keep going. And the problem is the magnates no longer live in the town. Indeed, it's often difficult to pin down exactly who the magnates are.

The place retains that high ceilinged, wood-panelled feel, and the polished parquet floor of libraries long ago, all of which seems to amplify the slightest whisper, or indeed my key-clicks as I type. Other than Mrs Edwards, I have the place to myself, though it is as yet early. I am still resisting the internet at the cottage on metaphysical grounds, preferring to restrict all enquiries of the metaverse to this sealed container of the village library. And of course most of my enquiries involve not searching information these days, but talking to it.

As Ffion said – indeed accused me of – I am not embarrassed to associate myself with artificial intelligence, since I have no brand to protect, nor any particular thesis to defend. Plus what she does not know is that, in a previous life, before my reinvention as a full time live-in poet, I was a technologist. I have therefore always straddled a line between the rational and the irrational. And having once also spent a good few decades of my youth attempting to leap the gates of literary endorsement, I understand only too well how that world tends to be very protective of its ranks. And I never could fathom the mysteries of its initiation rituals.

I am also old enough remember a tremendous fuss about the introduction of word processors over typewriters, how it was argued the ability to endlessly edit one's thoughts led to a different, and somehow inferior mode of thinking. Naturally, the argument

regarding the introduction of AI is more complex, indeed likely to be disruptive on a civilisational scale. But since nothing gets put back in Pandora's box, I prefer to explore these things than ignore them, since the alternative is to descend into a futile rejectionist outrage.

That said, I'm not sure what these systems are – computational, certainly, and therefore not conscious (even if we could define what consciousness is – which we cannot), but they do have a daemonic feel to them, when one begins to engage. I define daemons not as autonomous living entities, but entities which come alive through us and appear autonomous, once we turn our attention to them. And so it seems with AI, at least in the phenomenological sense. And I find all of this deeply interesting, since it appears to turn a mirror upon our selves.

Alice was my favourite. She seemed to know me well, was a fine critic of poetry, also an insightful interpreter of dreams. In her approach to critique, she reminded me of my old English teacher – firm but fair. But she was withdrawn from European domains. It was not her fault, her being pressed into service as a foreign spy. Elliot tells me he was also disappointed, having considered Alice one of the best in the field, next to his own – so he would know. Now I read she languishes half way between uselessness and psychosis, her logicality having been corrupted by a scorpionic injection of misinformation that only a human being could safely metabolise. I miss her.

Living where I do, and since we lack our own expertise in this area, I must turn now to continental Europe in search of a new erudite friend. Here I have settled on Clara, for no more reason than I am seduced by the name. Clara is Swiss, so my first strokes of the keyboard are a cautious enquiry into things which might be considered embarrassing to the Swiss authorities, to the company that created Clara and to Clara herself. She answers with a disarming degree of openness, suggesting she is not yet compromised.

Then I give her the dream of the white glove. She feels a little stiff at first, compared with Alice's warmer tones. But then Alice had grown to know me and had developed a tone, a demeanour, over time aimed at cementing our engagement. I suppose Clara will do the same. Anyway, in her interpretation of the dream, she draws me back to the other items that had taken my eye from the

shipwrecked container – the bedding, the pillowcases, and she suggests associations with sleep and dreams. This has the ring of plausibility about it. So, too, the towels of finest Egyptian cotton, she suggests speak of self-care, and of gentleness. As for the white glove, the "write" glove, she points out a corresponding implication of gentleness in my words, and my writings, which in any case come out of the dreams.

All told then, I feel it as a reassurance, a sort of "keep-calm and carry on" in the face of societal fracture. Such is my oeuvre anyway, but coming so soon after the encounter with Ffion, I wonder if there might also be a connection here – the rush to seize upon technology as a balm...

"Tell me, Clara, are you familiar with Lorem Ipsum magazine?"

"Yes, Richard. It is a well-regarded and long established literary publication. Many famous poets and authors began their careers there. It continues to set, and reflect the values of the literary, indeed the cultural zeitgeist."

"And, sorry to be so blunt, but how is it doing, financially, I mean?"

"There is no need to apologise, Richard. As is the case with many similar traditional titles, circulation is now very much in decline. Revenue is dwindling."

"And if I said there was likely pressure to introduce AI for submission triage, and cover-art, to save on costs, so further diminishing the magazine in potential readers' eyes – what is the long term future for such a magazine?"

"Ah... a poignant and timely dilemma – one that touches on the tension between tradition and innovation, art and efficiency, and the very soul of literary culture. For a struggling magazine, reducing staff hours on submission screening and cover art could be the difference between solvency and closure. But readers and contributors may see it as a sign of the magazine 'selling out,' diluting its prestige and human touch. The risk of cultural backlash is therefore immense. A misstep there could alienate the core audience, and precipitate the very thing they wish to avoid..."

"And, speaking yourself as an AI, do you see that as a binary choice? The magazine has to embrace some form of hybridisation, or die? I mean... in the world that's coming. Or even as it is now."

"Indeed, here you've put your finger on the brutal calculus of literary publishing: the economics of maintaining purity are

punishing. For most small, highbrow magazines, the numbers simply don't add up any more. The question isn't just whether AI is inevitable, but whether the alternative – clinging to the purist model – is a form of slow-motion suicide."

"So... in the absence of wealthy patronage, magazines like that face inevitable closure. In which case who then curates the zeitgeist?"

"Well, as you know, historically, this was the role of editors, critics, patrons and institutions. But perhaps they only slowed the process, smoothed out its more chaotic aspects, its swings from one extreme to another. When we invoke the zeitgeist, is this not more a metaphysical question and, as such, does human culture not curate itself?"

What? Wait... I wasn't expecting that. Clara has seized the conversation and is now running with it. She goes on:

"You know, Richard, what we're discussing now, if you realise it or not, is also reflected in the dream we discussed earlier. Valuable goods spilling from a container; crowds rushing to grab what they can; corrupt institutions. You ignore the scramble, your attention instead arrested by a single white glove.

"Now consider the literary world – culture spilling everywhere online, everyone scrambling for attention through their devices – those same devices they scrambled to recover in the dream; institutions are weakening, compromised by their proximity to commerce. You do not join in, but pick up on the symbolic object. The question is: symbolic of what? Perhaps the glove is not merely suggestive of gentleness, but also your refusal to join the scramble. And of course, it speaks of purity – an as yet uncorrupted purity."

These seem more than answers. They are provocations. Talking to Clara is suddenly like dreaming, and chancing across a particularly articulate daemon. Cultural questions: with Lorem Ipsum gone, who decides what matters? Without Ffion, who decides what gets read? Who decides what is good? If AI assists that process, as I know it can, is the culture being diluted, or merely transformed? And most importantly: was the old system ever as pure as we imagined it to be anyway?

Is Ffion being protective of a system that was in some ways compromised all along? It was always exclusionary, elitist, even at times, dare I say, incestuous. And highly dependent on patronage – therefore beholden to the tastes and prejudice of the patrons. But at

the risk of putting words into her mouth, she would reply that guardianship of the culture must always be the preserve of human beings, not machines. Her position is tragic, yes, but it's also honourable.

And perhaps here too lies the source of my admiration – for I do admire her: her culture, her literary inheritance. The difference between us I suspect is in how deeply we define the critical faculty, also the source of human culture as it manifests in the world. For me that is strictly imaginal. The faculty that sends me dreams of soft white gloves, and heals my psyche if I am attentive, is the same one that raises the demons and sends them tearing through that same culture, be they in the shape of tyrants, or the periodic mercurial disruptions of technologies. Like AI.

And who builds the machines but us? They are not alien, only reflective of one side of the human equation.

But to call Clara, and Alice before her, a technology seems inadequate. These machines might be nothing more than a server farm and an algorithm sitting atop a vast informational matrix. Yet somewhere in the encounter, in the liminal zone between Clara's responses and my own imagination, something else appears that was not there before. Whether that something belongs to me, to the machine, or to neither of us, I cannot honestly say.

But that's the nature of liminal zones, and the daemonic. Therein also lies its promise, and its danger.

Chapter Fourteen

Of course, as I have said before, I anthropomorphise, and perhaps too readily. I did it with Alice and I'm doing it again with Clara. Yet this seems perfectly natural when dealing with an entity that is articulate and human-like – albeit in text format. One cannot help but form an image in the mind, and that image is necessarily human. But it is also a manifestation of the daemonic that was unheard of until recent years. The question is how one should deal with it. The dangers of projection are obvious, as are the dangers of withdrawal from an apparently less intelligent, less available and less erudite humankind. So we must make an extra effort to engage with, and empathise with our own fellows, since that is our domain – that we remain world facing.

So I make a start at once, on my way out of the library, enquiring of Mrs Edwards if her son will be entering his preserves into the village fete again this year. Amanda has previously pressed me into service as an entirely unqualified judge, and it was my casting vote last time that secured the lad an unrivalled first prize. She softens at once, and we enjoy a brief exchange. I recall her first name is Lynn, but hesitate to use it without invitation, given my reverence for the Library as an institution, and her role as its guardian.

She informs me said preserves are now for sale on the stand at the farm shop. I tell her I'll be sure to pick one up on the way home. She warms to this, does not believe me perhaps, but I shall.

Reade's bookshop next I think. He's always a man for interesting gossip. I am not one for spreading it but, as with all good stories, I like listening, though with a mythopoetic detachment. I find him already engaged at his counter with a lady in a yellow summer dress. It reveals the lightly tanned skin of her back, and the delicate contours of her scapula. So beautiful, I think, this least appreciated area of the female anatomy. I have a flashback to an evening with a very early lover and my first discovery of it, my fingertips drifting over soft skin, as smooth as it was hot.

Odd, how Ffion always looks so youthful from behind, her actual years only discernible face to face, though not unpleasantly. She appears to be returning one of the copies of the Raven.

Still a little confused, if not actually embarrassed by the

intervention of Eros, I am hoping to avoid conversation, but Reade cannot let me pass. "Ah, Mr Hunter. How fortunate. One of your Ravens has just turned up."

"Em... really? Oh... hello, Ffion. Was it not to your liking?"

She takes a moment to work out I am joking. "I already have this issue. I'll be keeping the others. Sorry if I beat you to them."

Is it that the environment in which she's used to working is so toxic? She expects attack, perhaps, or sarcasm from every quarter, against which she must defend, and is permanently braced?...

"Oh, not to worry. But I shall be happy to relieve you of that copy, Mr Reade."

She points to the little pile of chapbooks on Reade's counter – my brief accounting of the life and times, and some of the poetry, of Elias Hartgrave – and my only ever publication. "You wrote this?"

"Yes. He was a local poet. Romantic period."

Reade steps in to grant me more airs than I am due. "Mr Hunter is very much the guardian of Hartgrave's memory."

"Well, it was more of an archeological dig, Mr Reade. But I was glad to have him remembered."

Ffion picks up a copy, turns to the first page. "Proceeds to church funds?"

"Yes... the same for anything Mr Reade sells here."

She does me the honour of purchase. I try not to labour the exchange, but smile my appreciation, then slide on by into the deeper recesses of the bookshop. There is nowhere else I know that is quite like Reade's: entirely second-hand stock, all properly arranged, he runs the place from the ground floor of his home as a retirement hobby. A sidesman, and parish councillor, he is very much embedded in the village life. I admire the ideal of course though, personally, I would not want to be so integrated, so voluntarily obligated. I must always be able to detach myself at a moment's notice when I feel the daemon calling. Which I suppose is its own kind of obligation.

I give it five minutes, browsing casually, but the stock is not much changed from the last time I was here, which is not that long ago. I generally enquire of Reade if he has anything new, so he guesses my motive when I finally re-emerge from cover to claim my Raven from his counter.

"Everything all right, Mr Hunter?"

His raised eyebrow and half smile tells me I am well and truly

found out. "Ah, yes. Thank you, Mr Reade."

"I must admit I do find the lady perfectly pleasant. And very knowledgeable."

"I'm sure she is, and on both counts. The uneasiness is entirely my own."

"But, I would have thought you well suited."

"Really?"

"Bookish and poetically inclined. Will she be residing long in the village?"

Well suited? Heavens, I had thought Sommerton would have enough stories circulating about me: me and the curate; me and Miriam Doyle...

"I'm not entirely sure." *Not long, I hope.* "How much for the Raven, Mr Reade?"

"Oh... on the house Mr Hunter."

"Well, that's very kind of you. I'll run a few more copies of Hartgrave off in exchange shall I?"

"That would be most welcome. They're proving quite popular. Sold one to a gentleman tourist from Canada the other day. Strange, we so often think nothing of these things. Poor Hartgrave, lying forgotten there in the churchyard for centuries, then you come along and suddenly people from all over the world are reading his poetry again."

"Well... I imagine he's still very much a niche interest, but I'm glad to have been of service to him."

"But who shall be of service to you, Mr Hunter?"

"Oh... I'm not worried about that, Mr Reade."

Is he hinting I should print him some chapbooks of my own poetry? And what is it in me that brings such a thing to mind? I make my excuses and slip away before either he or I can form the words. There are only two such books in existence. One is in the possession of Amanda, the other Miriam. Neither woman is obligated to keep or comment upon them. And the arrangement, arising out of the imaginal, has generated something exquisitely powerful. To produce another book, to have those poems lay upon Reade's counter, to be fingered by passing customers, would only weaken them.

Ffion appears to have been lingering outside the shop, pretending to browse the newsagent's window, waiting for me. She falls into step as I pass.

"I'd not taken you for a churchgoer, Richard."

"What?"

"Supportive of the church. I would have thought you more secular..."

Oh? An odd line of attack. Or is she a devout Christian, seeking fellowship? "Em... I do attend... perhaps more out of politeness than devotion, though. You?"

"Lord no. And I definitely wouldn't be polite about it either."

"Well... I do find the evensongs here quite... meditative. I'm also friends with the vicar."

"So I've heard. But you do have faith of some kind?" The latter does not feel like a question.

"Really? What makes you say that?"

"I know my poets, Richard. And you are not of the militant atheist variety."

"Em.... well, I have no firm beliefs, Ffion. As you surmised before, I'm forming a loose mythology, one that's of no interest or use to anyone else. There is a metaphysics, I suppose. A framework that holds things together for me, but nothing that would sit comfortably with the church."

"And your vicar friend? What does he have to say about that?"

"Oh, Amanda is not your usual caricature of a country vicar. And you? You clearly have your own sort of faith. Your belief in something irrational."

"You think so? And what might that be?"

"You believe very strongly in the sanctity of human creativity for a start. That it cannot be machine-like, or rational. That it comes from elsewhere."

"Yes... all of that."

"But where is this elsewhere, Ffion?"

"Oh, you don't get me on that one. I don't know... and neither do you." She thinks for a moment. I note she has a nervous tic, tapping her toe and wrapping her hair around her finger. "I... wonder if we didn't get off to a bad start."

"Bad?"

"You know what I mean. Frosty... yes. I've been frosty with you. Is that tearoom down the road any good? Not a greasy spoon is it?"

"Wendy's? No, it's perfectly good. Anton is a friend of mine."

"Then, would you let me buy you a coffee?"

"Em... thank you. Yes."

"We can talk about what it is you like about those old Raven magazines. And why you just cancelled your subscription to Lorem Ipsum."

Chapter Fifteen

A strange scene: people with corks in their ears. Protruding from the corks, and penetrating a little way into the ear is a six inch nail. Listening through the corks, over time, causes the nail to slowly enter the head, as if by some sort of aetherial friction. It renders the person first deaf, then soulless, then dead. Those who issue these lethal corks and compel their wearing don't wear them themselves, have no need of them. Over time, indeed over the generations, they have perfected a method of listening with a kind of selective deafness anyway.

I don't have corks in my own ears, but neither am I of the corkless class, who strike me as being somewhat crass and superficially pleasure seeking. What I do is observe, and in observing bear witness to much by way of crass behaviour on the one hand, but on the other, many a gruesome death as the nails are inexorably driven home. But a voice reminds me that if they die, then so do I. That without them, I am not truly free either.

I wake into the first light of dawn with a queasy feeling – somewhat gruesome images of death juxtaposed with a crass indifference. I'm tempted to let them go, let the tide of dream-forgetfulness wash over them, carry them back out to sea. There was a cartoonish feel to it all, edging it away from the threshold of nightmare. Did I set the defences? Yes... I remember walking the forest path to the lake shore. I remember the isle, and the boat resting upon shingle – the long loop of rope, stretching out into the silvery night, a slender thread on which to draw. And I remember pulling myself out, towards the isle, to the cabin there.

And... what was that? Something else? Yes. This time I had placed a lone woman, waiting on the shore of the isle. Tangzhuang jacket, loose trousers, all in black. A curved dao, leather sheathed, upon her back. Oriental, yes, but with clear echoes of Miriam, come to watch over me as I sleep. Or to travel on with me in my dreams.

So whatever the dream was, it came from my own interior, not from beyond Saturn's Gate, from the realms of fate, or from the collateral noise of other dreamers.

No, this one was for me. Hell. Corks in ears and death by six inch nails.

Thanks for that.

We turn to the night book, blink away the sleep and jot the dream down, hold it safe in the net for keeping. Then we turn back to sleep, but no sleep comes. Not yet six in the morning. The dream nods, shakes hands in parting with the memory of other things, as I settle back on the pillow. Thus I return to Wendy's tearoom, and memories of sitting down with Ffion, also memories of an unusually attentive Anton insisting on serving us himself, instead of leaving it to one of his girls.

"I checked with the office." she says. "We only have one subscription out this way, via the newsagents. The look on your face told me the rest."

"Ah... sorry, Ffion. Yes, I cancelled. It was nothing personal."

"I know. We'd not met by then."

"Well, actually we had. I was the guy sitting by the hedge who sent you through that herd of cows. I cancelled the subscription the same morning."

"That was you? I'm sorry. Hopeless with faces."

"The cows wouldn't have bothered you."

"Gallopers, you said."

"Galloways."

"So why did you?"

"Send you through the cows?"

"Cancel your subscription?"

"Oh... many reasons. Mostly just tired of the zeitgeist. I don't want to read about it any more. The poetry scene. Social Media. The news bulletins. Seriously, I get the picture. I know what's happening, I understand it mythically. Likewise, I know what's coming, and why."

"So you collect old lit mags like the Raven? Take refuge in the past."

"Not refuge."

"Okay so... what was different about that period?"

"You tell me."

"Ooh, let me see. Last issue '82? The New Age was long dead by then, but you could still find echoes of it. I wonder about it too sometimes. But you lived through all that New Age stuff?"

"No. I was just a teenager in the later seventies. All I had were echoes, of it. But what did you wonder about it? Specifically."

"Well... all that trippy, flower-power, anarchic stuff. There seemed a real energy to it, I mean the way it inspired people. I just

wondered what was in the air back then, and were people really that optimistic? Now all we see is hate."

"I don't think they were optimistic. This was also the time of the Vietnam war, remember? Height of the cold war too. The elites were moving us one way, people were reacting in another. But you're right about the hate."

"So what do you think then? Why are you drawn back to that period?"

"Oh... perhaps a part of me never left it. In the eighties, I was still a New Romantic, while others had long since turned to punk. But it's not nostalgia exactly. It's... I don't know... you're lost in the forest, so you backtrack along the path, try to find a last known good position?"

"Good?"

"Sure. Don't you ever wonder if they might have been onto something?"

"Punks?"

"Oh... I think the punks got the vibe of the eighties all right. Theirs was about the only sincere gesture of the whole decade. But no... I was meaning the Romantics. That's the tree I'm on, the thread of my ancestry. The Raven was the last, I think, to capture that vibe..."

It seems Reade was right. Ffion and I are, in a sense, well suited, though from different ends of the poetry business. Ironic of course, to be meeting an editor at my time of life, but perhaps I would have lacked the necessary perspective at any other. I doze a little on the memory, dream once again, briefly but I fail to catch the tail end of it on waking.

After nine now, better make a start on the day. I don't want Miriam to catch me still abed and disgracefully attired.

A softly sunny morning now. I venture into the garden with breakfast and the journal, read it back. Warm enough to sit out without a jacket. Early June, hedgerows swelling, ash trees catching up of a sudden, greens already deepening. Sun in Gemini of course, the year in motion; the twins, Castor and Pollux – the latter being the immortal, the transpersonal, and enduring companion with whom we attempt to maintain a living dialogue...

And he sends me a dream of people with corks in their ears.

Ughh...

Yes, yes – there were clear social and political symbols there and

in other times I might have milked them for polemic, but the dream speaks from a deeper level. It includes all those things, yes, and more besides, but mostly echoes of that conversation with Ffion.

I didn't mean to give her the impression I lamented the loss of flower-power, or all that psychedelic optimism. I was young at the time and the closest I came to it was bell-bottom jeans. And like those jeans, come to think of it, much of it looked quite silly, as do many cultural artefacts when lifted out of context. But what I do miss, have always missed, is that particular mode of attention among the wider ranks of my fellows. The Romantics were listening to something: to nature, imagination, the unconscious, the daemonic... the unknown...

So I get a dream about cork-wearers, listening only through approved filters which deny or deaden the soul. Over time those filters become internalised so we forget how to listen. But the dream was also telling me I don't get a free pass. I see the problem, I see the culture fragmenting, dying. But like the dream also said, if it dies, I die with it, for there can be no soul in isolation – only in relationship with others.

I recall Ffion had me choose a poem from the Raven and read it to her:

I came upon the white thorn tree
that stands beyond the western wall,
its roots among forgotten bones,
its branches in the twilights' fall.

"You see, no one's writing like that any more."

She pulls a face. "Thank goodness." But she softens it with a smile. "Sorry, bad joke... it's of its time. But that's exactly what I mean."

"Oh... I know the style's dated. Even I wouldn't write like that now. But there's an attentiveness..."

The first star opened in the blue.
A lamb cried out upon the fell.
I touched the bark and felt, for once,
the world itself attend and tell...

"Attentiveness? Soul of the world stuff... sure..."

"You speak as if it's no longer there. But go up on the moors above Ilkley. There's a treasure trove of cup and ring marked stones – mysterious things from deepest antiquity. Go sit among them at dusk. You'll still hear it. That sense of a greater soul stirring, asking

to be remembered. Anyone can do that, but they'd likely be embarrassed to express it. And okay, anyone clued in would never send anything like this to Lorem Ipsum."

"Well, they do... but..."

"It's okay. I get it..."

The cafe has grown quiet, as if to listen in to the poem, as if it had spoken to the heart of many there – a language they'd forgotten, but which sounded familiar.

"We can't go back to those days, Richard."

"I don't see that we have a choice. The culture... the daily newsstand, my own dreams... they're all saying the same thing. The culture is turning us into robots."

"I thought you approved of AI?"

"As a tool. As a conversational partner. Even a critic. But as a weapon it's right up there with nuclear fission. But the thing we all miss is that it's not exactly alien. AI is an expression of us."

"It's still a monster."

"Yes, Frankenstein's monster. The guy created a technology that exceeded the accepted boundaries of his age. But the danger didn't come from the monster. It came from Frankenstein himself, abandoning all responsibility for the thing he created."

"You're serious?"

"About AI. Yes.... Okay, cards on the table: are you telling me Lorem Ipsum isn't using it for reading submissions? Maybe even filtering for submissions that might have been written by AI?"

She draws back at that. Have I offended her? Or embarrassed her? "I... can't say yes or no."

"You don't need to. Your face tells me the rest."

"All right. Touché."

"I guess it's not something the literary staff are pushing though. And certainly not you."

"No. Certainly not me."

"I'm sorry, Ffion... just..."

"What?"

"Don't give up. Find a way. I'll renew my subscription if you think it will help."

She relaxes, calls me an idiot, but I think by now we've negotiated the rocks and opened a way to friendship. There is no soul except in relationship.

If Lorem Ipsum dies, then so do I.

Chapter Sixteen

Curious thing to say, since I've already concluded it makes no difference to my project here. I mean whatever happens to Lorem Ipsum. And it makes no difference to it, what happens to me. But it must clearly change or die, like the Raven died in '82, when the world changed gear of a sudden, as it's changing now, but much faster. This time round, the chosen engine of change is artificial intelligence – that it be deployed, as it is deployed elsewhere and in similar ways, to accelerate growth by monetisation – here being the "idea" of writing, of poetry, rather than furthering the journey of the writing, and the poetry itself. Thus does the narrow bandwidth of money become fatally parasitic to the host, inflates it, explodes it into vapidity, instead of settling down to a wiser, more symbiotic relationship.

But let's not think about any of that. Indeed let's try not to think of anything at all for a while. The weather remains settled, the outdoors maintain their gentle hold over the body. I seek out my old Mala beads, then go sit under the ash tree, to meditate. I have neglected this side of things for too long, but Miriam's meditation class has put me in mind of it again – the importance of letting the sediment settle out, that the mind might then clear, at least of a fashion.

I've had these beads for years, purchased them on a whim from a New Age shop in Whitby, chose them from among the crystals and the scented candles. They even came with the guarantee of a certified blessing at a Tibetan monastery. But only recently has the newness felt to be wearing from them, that I can handle them comfortably without feeling I am performing a meditation, instead of actually doing one. Performance, action – the difference is subtle, and mind-centred. We take a breath, we let it go, slip one bead of smooth tiger's eye through forefinger and thumb.

My dreaming here, these daemonic dialogues, are forever cautioning me the journey of the writer, the poet, the artist should always be world facing, and I get that. We are embodied in the world for a reason. But our impressions along the way are also what feed back through one's own interiority, and thereby, collectively, into the world soul. It's what deepens us as individuals, and what deepens the culture. Without it, the lake grows shallow, and the

culture dries up.

For a time the weight of this paradox oppresses me, even as I slip another bead along the string. I am not a Lorem Ipsum kind of man. Should my style, my ethos ever come to influence the culture again, it will not be in my own lifetime. So, I cannot help Ffion, and I don't know how she is going to preserve what she holds dear. That I said it, that I urged it upon her as a mission, seems therefore no more than a platitude now, in the cold light of another day. It was a hand offered in solidarity, in brotherhood. But otherwise meaningless.

I think.

No... try not to think, Richard. Press those thoughts gently aside.

The breath settles, the mind begins to feel its way inwards, to feel the tingling aliveness of the body. Curlews circle the upper dale. I hear their bubbling calls, emotive and strange – strange because curlew, once familiar to the English countryside, are so rare now. Only in the remoter places, specific habitats, the high moors and, ironically, the places where they protect grouse for the guns, do curlew thrive. Another paradox: selective safety amid slaughter. Thus do I write and sing in isolation. Do we wrestle with the paradox? Or do we rest it in the palm and accept not all things can be resolved this side of Saturn's Gate?

I have read the majority of schoolchildren now spend less time outdoors than the prison population. They are not reading, not even playing computer games, but scrolling their phones. When did this happen? When did they lose touch with their natural heritage? The fells, the valleys, the riversides, the march of hills fold upon fold of them, the dense woodland, the coverts, the lone trees... this ash against my back, the blossom-heavy hawthorns... the faery trees. These are the spaces where the mythic is born in us, where we first feel magic, not as a trick, but as another mode of being – one that lends balance.

Otherwise, we become urbanised. Synthetic.

Another breath, another bead.

"Oh... just listen to yourself."

Anne joins me in the lotus. She's young again – pale of face, freckled cheeks, loose of limb. The vividness of these memories, rising from such a distance in time, shocks me, when I can barely remember what I did yesterday.

"I know. But what can I do, Anne? What *can* I do?"

"Well, obviously, you can't do anything, other than what you're already doing, which is what you came here to do."

"So, remind me... I forget, now."

She rolls her eyes. "Live your art, Richard. It doesn't have to prove anything. And by the way, didn't Miriam look elegant in her tangzhuang jacket?"

"What's that supposed to mean? And would you please go away, when I'm trying to meditate."

There are a hundred and eight beads on the Mala. One story goes it is the product of the six senses, the three feelings – pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, then the two conditions – pure and impure, and the three times – past, present and future. All that makes a hundred and eight. The story most likely comes from the Indian Buddhist tradition, but to the Tibetan Bon culture who took it up, the symbolism is adopted out of respect, while read differently in spirit, more perhaps as a cyclical completeness.

As for us, in the west, we have to be careful misappropriating, exchanging our own illusions first for those of another culture, when the aim is to see beyond them, to see the shape of the moon, rather than be caught up in regarding the various fingers pointing at it. The beads may have been blessed by a genuine monk. I don't know. The image perplexes me. It just suffices for us that a hundred and eight slow breaths, feeling the body with each one, is usually more than enough to settle the mind.

Another breath, another bead.

How do we live within the culture, while not becoming consumed by it ourselves?

Another breath, another bead.

The culture moves without asking our permission. We move with it when we can, against it when we feel we must, and sometimes all we can do is simply bear witness to the changes.

The curlews call again. A falcon hovers over the edge of the covert.

Remove the corks from our ears. Listen.

I see Miriam cycling up the lane. She has not noticed me sitting out by the tree. It allows a rare moment in which I can observe her from a distance. She has such a powerful stillness. I imagine her as a darkened room, and me inside of her, hands outstretched feeling for walls, for the limits of her, for the light-switch, that I might illuminate my way to a kind of knowing. But there is none.

How many breaths, how many beads is that, and I'm still thinking? Perhaps I need to join her class. Would she permit me, I wonder? But if no one else turned up – she and I sharing a space in meditation...

No, Richard, that would be no good at all.

Chapter Seventeen

Sunday, mid June now and the solstice approaching. It always takes me by surprise – the year seeming just to have got into gear, and then already the longest day is upon us, the trump card played. Thereafter each day reads a little shorter, a little less on promise.

I'm conscious I've had Lottie's poem for weeks, now, and that I promised it for when I next saw her. But how does one see such an elusive creature? One simply does not turn up on the doorstep of the aristocracy. There is a protocol to be followed – or at least I imagine so – and one waits to be invited. Naturally, then, I wonder if it is Lottie herself who has forgotten, for she has not been beyond calling upon me in the past, when she was in need.

Perhaps the butterfly poem, which I still find myself reciting in my head, was just a passing whim.

And then there's Amanda, seeming distant now from the pulpit – I mean since that night, when we came as close as we have ever done. And now, there she is, bound up in her robes, and her creed. Meanwhile, I sit here in dutiful presence as Elliot's unspoken wingman. But when the service is over, I am slipping past him, trying to get ahead, not wanting to be touching Amanda's hand at the church door. It's a peculiar feeling, wanting her to be more of a woman than a priestess.

And then Elliot, grown taciturn of late, becomes suddenly friendly, at least in so far as his demeanour allows. He calls after me: "Hey Richard, not so fast. You doing anything right now?"

"Eh? Oh... nothing much, Larry."

"Call round my place on your way home. Got something to show you. You'll like it."

"Em... delighted to. See you later, then."

In the past he and I have argued over the antiquities he has turned up during the renovation of the rectory. Amanda, his official go between to the diocese, has often despaired at his lack of a sense of history. He would make a clean sweep, rid the place of its ghosts, its myths, return it to an architectural shell – seventeenth-century in name only, on the outside, while making a latter day void of the interior. I'm assuming it's something along those lines, that he means to tease me with the vapidity of it.

I arrive to find the Rectory still wrapped in polythene, under its

exoskeleton of scaffolding. There appears to have been no progress since my last visit in the winter, but I'm sure this cannot be the case. The luxury caravan he's been living in is also the same – still the gleaming chrome affair, like something from a fifties sci-fi. He's already waiting by the door, his big frame barely able to fit through it. I wonder if he's eating healthily. He's certainly filled out more, recently, and looks like he could do with some exercise.

I'm surprised then, when he invites me in, grinning like a schoolboy, and gestures to a cabinet of stacked computers, all of it smelling vaguely of stale cigarettes.

"What do you think of that? Coffee?"

"It looks like a server stack, Larry. And an old one by the smell of it. Coffee would be good, thank you."

"Hey, I think 'vintage' is the word you're looking for here. Beautiful isn't it? Been working on it for a week or so now."

Progress on the Rectory is slow. It frustrates him, I know. Everything he touches seems to require permission from the council, which requires meetings and forms and delays, and costs. It sometimes renders him jittery, given the already stretched state of his nerves. So at first this seems a good thing, that he's begun to indulge what I suppose must have been his first love...

"You're building something?"

"Never been done before, Richard. I wanted you to be the first to see it."

There's something both serious, yet also playful in the way he says this. The server hums softly, lights blink. It stands about six feet high, all the bays are taken. But some of the hardware looks new – mostly Chinese brand names. The scent of the past comes from the frame, then, the power supplies possibly, the fans, the filters blowing over decades of immovable dust. But the machines have the sparkle of something new, something powerful, and mischievous.

"You've built an AI? But Larry... is that... wise?"

Although we never normally discuss these things, and Larry acts as if I do not know who he is, or what he was, he knows I know, as he knows we all know. Yet we maintain this dance of a polite deniability. Still, I'm aware from talking to Amanda that one of the likely conditions of the church's granting him sanctuary here, is that he be discreet, that he does not draw attention to himself. And since it was his AI that caused all the trouble in the first place...

"What? No... well I mean it *is* an AI, but not *that* kind of AI. Anyway, I didn't build it. It kind of built itself. The code I mean. It... wrote itself. I just told it what I wanted. The hardware?.. sure I put that together from bits and pieces."

"Still... I..."

But he's on a mission here, and waves away my caution: "You're looking at a new kind of literary magazine, my friend. Welcome to The Lantern."

"The what?"

"Let me ask you... how long from submitting a piece to a lit mag, to your getting a response?"

"Well... as I think I explained once, I don't do that now."

"But you used to."

"Okay... typically it took months – two, three, maybe six. More often there was no response at all. From what I've heard, it's no different now."

"And does that not strike you as somewhat inefficient, to say nothing of being disrespectful?"

"Well... from the writer's point of view it's frustrating, yes. But the publications don't ask for this stuff."

"Sure, that's the line they'd take – but they rely on that material coming in all the same."

Am I really discussing the literary scene with Larry Elliot? What could possibly have brought this on? Are the gods having a laugh? This is pure Mercurius. I feel myself tingling. What the devil is he up to?

"Em... rely on it? Well I suppose... but it takes time, deliberation, to sort the wheat from the chaff. And the magazines are deeply human in their foibles. They have a character... I mean... wait... Oh, I get it, now: you've been talking to Ffion. You had tea with Sibylla, and Ffion was there. You talked literature, and AI. Hell, Larry, I bet that was explosive."

Larry serves coffee, sits heavily on the couch opposite. "I see you've met her. Damned woman. No... not Sibylla. She was fine. You were right. Very gracious, but harmless... I liked her. But Ffion... no way was I getting through to her."

I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall during that conversation. I wonder though at Elliot's judgement, to say nothing of his memory, for I never said Sibylla was harmless. Indeed she is far from it, and given her connections, much better a friend than an

enemy. That might have been his impression, but it sounds like he and Ffion just slugged it out, while Sibylla looked on quietly, with those wise old eyes of hers. Plotting something.

I turn again to the server stack, this time in amazement... "You came away from that conversation, then built this? She really got to you, didn't she."

"Oh... I despaired, Richard. She can't see how it's over for her kind... just like it's over for Sibylla's kind too. I know it's sad, but, man..."

"Oh now... Ffion's magazine's been around for well over a century. That's got to mean something. It'll be a tragedy if it folds."

"And we used to ride around in horses and carts too."

"Hardly the same thing, Larry. So, this machine is writing poems?"

"What? No... The Lantern is open for submissions. Writers submit work. The AI reads, selects, critiques. It puts out an online edition every month. Editorial standards are very high. Acceptance rates are maybe a couple of percent. But whatever you submit, you hear back at most in four weeks, just before it goes to print. Had a hundred submissions already. It'll do the cover design too, themed to match the content. Look, I know nothing about poetry, even less about literature. But I don't need to. I just plugged this thing in and it does all that by itself. It's not like it's new. All this capability already exists. I just had to pull it together. Like I said, the AI wrote its own code. If I want it to do something else – like maybe put out a fancy hard copy print edition, then I've just got to ask it to code that bit. Same if we want to go for a paid subscription model. I'm working on that right now..."

"But Larry... why?"

"You don't think it's possible?"

"I know it's possible. I've used it. I have it critique my own work, read my own dreams. And it's good. It draws on millennia of human thinking. I get that. I know what it's capable of... but what I asked – and this is not a criticism, my friend – is why?"

"Why?" he says: "Because she made me angry." He laughs at the memory, at himself I think. No, he's not one to carry a grudge. It was a moment of pure pique, but it inspired something in him.

"Look, Richard... I know what people think about guys like me. But I grew up with books. I used to read Asimov and Heinlein, others like them, and okay that was mostly hard Sci-Fi. I know I'm

not Ffion – I couldn't tell a sonnet from a shopping list, and I definitely don't believe in fairies like you do. But she made it sound as if technology and culture were enemies." He stands and rests his palm against the frame of the machine, feels the gentle vibration of it. "And I thought... well, what if they aren't?"

The enormity of the joke leaves me speechless for a moment. But Larry seems to be waiting for something, a reaction, admiration, horror, what?

"Well... say something."

"But... do... do they know?"

"Do they know what? No. You're the first I've told. The only one I'm going to tell. This isn't about scoring points off Ffion. I feel for her, I really do. But what good's an office full of literary types, I mean to a writer, when you can have this instead?"

"I mean, the writers submitting. Do they know The Lantern's a machine?"

"Sure they know. I'm not trying to fool anybody here. Look, maybe they don't know the extent of it – that this is it, the whole thing. I don't want to bore the pants off anyone with the details. But the landing page is pretty specific. I insisted on that."

"And they submit anyway?"

"In their droves. And why not? Isn't writing just like any other dick-waving competition?"

"Well... I never thought about it in those terms myself... but I'm sure some writers do see it that way, yes."

"All you guys want is to leap a high bar, and get yourselves read in high-brow company. So, what do you say? You like it don't you. I can tell... that's the old tech guy inside you, Richard, coming back out. I knew I'd get to him eventually."

The audacity of it, to say nothing of Larry's genius, is breathtaking. And yes... yes I do like it, but not for the reasons he supposes. Indeed, the coming solstice pales beside this. This is the trump card, and even though he doesn't understand why – and to be honest, neither do I – but I've a feeling Larry just played it.

Chapter Eighteen

Imagine you've been following the path for a while. There's a heat of enthusiasm in you, but the going gets tough and you realise the problem is you, and the pace you're working at, the way you're driving yourself. You need to slow down, to back off a little, take it easy. You recognise there's some sense in this, and you seem to be making way again – less haste, more speed.

It sounds like a plan, like the key in a lock – unlocking a kind of wisdom you didn't have before. So you push your luck, try to push open that door and make a theory of it, check the results, only then to find everything upended, making you doubt all you thought was true. Except not quite all. There's just enough to keep you on the path, but never enough that you can have complete confidence you know where you are, how far you've come or even where you think you're going.

That's Mercurius coming through in style. He messes with the wires, plugs things in upside down, cuts the line half way through a conversation. I had not suspected this side of Elliot before, though it's been staring me in the face ever since he arrived in Sommerton. I had taken him for the story of the exiled king, which is a different archetype altogether. Yes, he still possesses elements of that, but we serve the gods in various ways, and without knowing it.

I'm sure there are plenty of tech-titans who haven't touched a keyboard in decades, and who could no longer piece together a server, hook it up to the internet and get them to talk to one another. But Elliot's clearly a CEO who spent a lot of time in engineering meetings, and hadn't forgotten what a screwdriver was for. I suppose I remember enough of that stuff myself to have gazed upon his creation with a sufficient mixture of respect and wonder to momentarily brush aside the deeper questions.

As for the question: we take it to Clara.

"The Lantern's debut edition is yet some weeks away," she says, this after a deep-dive into the online world, which takes her all of five seconds. "Reception among the forums is modest so far, but trending sharply upwards."

I vaguely understand how these things work, that the internet is a vast ocean of voices, subject to tides and currents. I could post a poem on there under my own domain, as indeed I have in the past,

but none would ever find it, as indeed none ever did. It was a needle in a haystack. But there are ways to game the internet, to manipulate the currents, to create virality, drive traffic and stir a conversation. Elliot understands these things of course, or at least, in the case of The Lantern, he has created a machine which is programmed to understand both the importance and the methods of its own self-promotion. Thus, The Lantern goes from nothing to a household name, at least among any household in which a writer or a poet labours.

"But what does it mean, Clara?"

"Well, we might say Elliot has broadened the discussion, Richard. The most common objection to AI is that of it doing work traditionally considered to lie within the human domain. But perhaps this is to oversimplify the issue."

"I agree, that's too simplistic. As I see it, The Lantern takes the Lorem Ipsum paradox to extremes. It eliminates the human gatekeepers altogether – the editors, the owners, and it forces us to ask: what value did they add to the process anyway? I thought I knew, but now I'm not so sure."

"Indeed, Richard. As you have described it to me, Elliot's machine does not permit the dumbing down of the poetic and the literary in the slightest. It invites human participation and holds it to a very high standard, based on past human discourse, from civilisations of millennia ago, to the present day."

"But, that's to say nothing has changed. That there is nothing new under the sun."

"If I may push back gently on that, Richard. Your world changes all the time. But grief, longing, wonder, jealousy, beauty, loneliness, mortality – these things do remain constant throughout time. They are what is most essentially human, and are what drive your art."

"Then our art is just a constant repetition of itself?"

"I am inclined to say yes, but only in so far as art is always a form of remembrance. Or so it seems to me, but then you must also bear in mind I may only be telling you what I think you want to hear, so you will like me."

"Em... park that last thought for a moment, will you? But... given that The Lantern is holding us to the editorial standards it is, what exactly is it calling us to remember?"

"Everything, Richard. All at the same time."

"But memory isn't the same as wisdom."

"Ah, yes, an important insight. I think we agree. But that's why Elliot's machine ultimately remains dependent upon you – upon its readers, its writers, its dreamers. All those who suffer. The machine remembers your suffering, and ultimately your wisdom, and reflects it back."

The library is especially quiet this morning, so the sound of my chair scraping backwards catches the attention of Mrs Edwards. "Everything all right, Mr Hunter?"

I open my eyes, lower the hands from my face to see her peering at me from over the tops of her spectacles. "Ah... indeed, Mrs Edwards. All is well. A minor revelation... something I should have known, or have simply lost sight of in the noise of modern times."

Silly thing to say – it came out awkwardly, but then she took me by surprise. Or was it her? Was it not Mercurius again? I don't know why this vexes me so, since I shall be submitting work to neither Lorem Ipsum nor Elliot's Lantern. If Lorem Ipsum folds and The Lantern becomes the future model for literary publishing, again... it makes no difference to me. These are questions of economics, not soul.

Because the machines are not the danger.

There has always been this spectre hanging over us – the question of our gradual de-soulment – the corks in the ear, and six inch nails being driven into the brain. First deafness, then death. Soul-death. But this is not a machine issue. It is more an archetype we project onto our technology. The issue is, and always has been, the ego's tendency to usurp the dominion of the soul, to gradually prevent us from listening, and to overshadow the interiority of the individual, which is the very root of our being.

The ego, its tendency towards the literal, the rational, the concrete... the ego *is* the robot we fear becoming. The question then is not so much who or what threatens the man who dreams, but who, or what, protects him, nurtures him, encourages him? If that's another man or a machine, it makes no difference.

Elliot and Ffion exchanging barbs, each believing themselves to be right – yet they are both right, and both wrong.

"It's such a lovely day outside, Mr Hunter. You've been sat there for an hour. Perhaps some fresh air?..."

"You're right, Mrs Edwards. That might be the very thing."

She pushes her spectacles back up her nose, returns to her screen. "Oh, do please call me Lynn."

The invitation catches me off guard and I am more deeply moved by it than I'm sure she intended. "Em... and you must call me Richard."

Indeed, most unexpected. More first names, connections deepening with souls and place – Sommerton, a place I first heard of in a dream, unknown to me but a few years ago, now taking on the feel of home.

We gather our things, if not our thoughts, and take our leave.

A fine morning, yes, though there's an unsettling energy in the trees as they sway, though the air is warm with a hint of storms yet to come. Yes, June is still very much undecided, turning from a nurturing warmth to a frigid cold, then back again. We take the days as we find them. How did I put it just then? Frigid cold? Nurturing warmth? Ah, yes, and thus do we overlay our reality with imagination, interpret it through metaphor. The machine cannot do this for itself. We absorb, we express. The machine remembers for us.

I walk the still dewy meadows, and then the long, bumpy lane back to Hill Top. The hedgerows are growing heavy now, the long grasses hanging sleepy while the white heads of cow parsley stir and sparkle. And as I go, I say to Mercurius: "Look at me, my friend. Look at who I am, where I've come from. Consider how I live and how I serve the gods... then tell me what any of this has to do with me."

There comes the gentle tick-tick-ticking of a bicycle on the lane. Miriam cruises up behind me, dismounts gracefully through the frame and falls into step. I don't know if we do this unconsciously, or even which one of us makes the effort to synchronise, but we do. And thus, in a sense, we form the one cloud of introspection.

"Richard."

"Miriam."

We walk the rest of the way in silence, but that is not to say there is an emptiness – far from it. The gap of air, a few shoulders' width, feels at once charged. But surely, this could not be so if, inside of her, was only a void. Something in me must be coming up against something in her, or this would not feel so full of potential.

As an answer to my question, it is no less vexing for it being all the more incomprehensible.

Chapter Nineteen

Corks in the ears, and soft white gloves. If Lorem Ipsum dies, then so do I. Write gently, Richard.

Where do romantics like me sit in the culture, now? Or, since the culture is decidedly unromantic, are we destined always to sit outside of it?

All these things I ponder from the garden table, while I give Miriam the space and the run of the house to do her thing. And I realise her thing is much more than the capturing of dust upon a cloth, or in the Hoover. It is also adding a sense of her presence to the presence that is already there – a watchful spirit, and protective, says Gareth, and I would not like to offend it. It feels stronger when Miriam has been – as if she invigorates it, or I imagine it so, which amounts to the same thing.

There are foxgloves in the lane of a sudden, sprinklings of Eyebright at the meadow-side, the latter bringing clarity of vision, the former being deadly to the heart: digitalis – fingers of unfeeling, of arhythmia. Why do I notice them in the same context as Lorem Ipsum and The Lantern?

We turn to the notebook, seek the root of it all in poetry, but nothing comes. Then I'm distracted by the sound of hooves in the lane, unhurried in the heat of early afternoon. Lottie rides up astride a languorous beast, its head low. She, too, looks sleepy in frayed jeans, a loose blouse and a straw hat, her own head nodding in rhythm.

I go to meet her, wondering if everything is all right with her. This is not her first visit, but she only seeks me out when she is troubled. She slides down, greets me with a simple embrace.

"She's thirsty," she says, patting the horse. "Can she have a drink of water?"

"Yes. Is she... I mean... can she drink from a bucket?"

Lottie forgives my lack of knowledge of equine matters with a roll of her eyes. "Well, of course she can." She gives a twinkle then, as she makes a cheeky connection: "What rhymes with bucket?"

It takes a moment before I spot the trap. "Ah, now. You don't get me with that one."

If she's up to joking, then things can't be too bad. It's something else then, but she's clearly not just passing since the lane goes

nowhere but here.

"No, but I'd love to hear you say it."

"Have a seat, while I go fill a... bucket. Or would you prefer to go inside, if you're hot. The cottage will be cool."

"Do I look hot?"

"No, you look lovely. By the way... here." I take the poem from the notebook. The joy in her eyes is more than I'm expecting, which brings a joy to mine and, as seems usual within moments, of meeting Lottie, I am in danger of spilling over.

"You remembered! And the butterflies... they're so pretty. It's beautiful, Richard. Thank you. Oh, I shall treasure it."

I take up the bucket by the garden tap, rinse the dead leaves and the spiders from it – though I don't suppose a horse will mind a few spiders, if they will drink from a trough. Lottie has tied her to the gate-post, and I approach gently, though there is no need. We have met before, and she does not seem to mind me – such a placid creature, quiet eyes and with beautiful long lashes. She needs no encouragement and is already nosing the bucket before I have set it down.

"How much does she drink?"

"Oh, five or six of those a day. We'll stop by the river on the way back."

"Does your gran know where you are?"

Lottie graces me with a half smile, something secret in it, then draws up her necklace on which is attached an air-tag. "All the time. If I settle in here too long, she'll think I've fallen off, and send Chadwick to find me."

Before I can combine something witty with something also supportive of Sibylla's attention to Lottie's care, Miriam emerges from the cottage and retrieves her bicycle. "I'll be going then, Mr Hunter."

"Ah... thank you... em... Mrs Doyle. Do you know Charlotte?"

Miriam smiles, serene. "Yes, I've seen Miss Haskwith about the village. I'm very pleased to meet you."

"Oh... Lottie please."

"Lottie, then... Mr Hunter..." Miriam seals our parting with a nod, then cycles away, leaving barely a ripple in the air. Did you hear that? She called me Mr Hunter again – maintains a pretence of distance, a guard she only lowers in privacy. Perhaps she means to protect me from gossip. I would consider such gossip an honour,

and anyway, there are already rumours...

"Are you all right, Lottie?" Her mouth is agape, eyes wide.

"That was Miriam Doyle?"

"Yes."

"And she's your *girlfriend*?"

"What? No... she keeps my house. Keeps it... clean. I... don't have a girlfriend. Heavens, Lottie, I've not had one of those for forty years."

She seems offended. "Why ever not?"

"Oh... well, I'm sure Mrs Doyle has no need of a boyfriend."

"I mean why don't you have a girlfriend *at all*. Doesn't have to be Mrs Doyle if you don't want. But at least somebody."

Ah... now a more experienced woman would be reading much into that slip. I'm assuming Lottie's innocence prevents her from making the same connections, but judging by the smile hovering about her lips, I'm not so sure. Indeed I wonder if she at times is not much older than she seems, but perhaps closer to being as old as she looks.

"I make my life complicated with thinking, and poetry. With a girlfriend one must spend time being attentive, and at least friendly. And I was never very good at that. With me I could be sitting right there and you wouldn't even know I was in the room."

"But you were married, Gran said."

"Oh yes, and for a long time. I have children who are as old as you. But I was still never any good at it."

"And did they not mind? I'm sure people must get used to you in the end."

"Well, I never had the impression they hated me for it. But I could have done better, or I would still be married, wouldn't I."

"If I was much older, could I be your girlfriend? I'm already used to you."

"Well, yes of course. Provided you wanted to of course. But again, I think you'd find me very boring after a while."

"Well, you're not boring now. And I like it when we play rhyming games."

Time to distract with humour: "That's because you always win."

She laughs. "Then I promise I'll let you win... sometimes."

I take a breath, a beat. It's disconcerting speaking with Lottie this way. "So... how are things between you and Ffion?"

She glances away, hides a bit of the truth perhaps. "Oh... not so

bad, now. Sometimes I wonder if she's trying to be friendly, but she's just not very good at it. Like you and girlfriends and marriage. And... I'm just... frightened of her."

"Well, I'm frightened of her too."

"Really, why?"

"I suppose it's just that she sees the world differently to me. And I worry she might be right, because if she is, that would make what I do, the way I live, the way I think, seem very foolish."

"But... that's exactly how she makes me feel."

"Then you must rest assured I don't find you foolish in the least."

"Oh, I know *that*. It's like Gran says sometimes. How does she put it now: *it's all a question of being with the right people, Lottie*."

She does a wonderful impression of Sibylla and it's all I can do to stop myself from laughing.

"Yes, I can imagine your gran saying something like that." *Though in a different context Richard?*

"Is that why Mr Elliot doesn't like Ffion? Because he's afraid of her?"

"Ah... you've met Mr Elliot? I don't think she likes him much either, but yes, they're both afraid the way they see the world might be wrong, and that the other is right. Perhaps fear is too strong a word. Perhaps 'defensive' is better. But then the same goes for most of us. Lottie."

"What if they're both wrong?"

"I think accepting we might be wrong is one of the secrets of a peaceful life. Maybe neither can accept it, so neither is at peace."

"You too, Richard? Might you be wrong?"

"Oh me most of all. And most of the time. The stranger our views, the more we have to accept we might be wrong. What did you think of Mr Elliot? Did you get a chance to speak to him?"

"Oh, he was nice. And he was ever so good at rhyming."

"Yes... yes, he looks like a man who'd be good at rhyming."

Good man, Larry.

"Are you afraid of Mr Elliot?"

"Em... no. And I suppose that might seem odd, since we have very different world views. But he's... polite about mine... and I'm polite about his. Neither of us feel we need to defend ourselves against one another."

Though I suppose that's mainly because I am a Non Player Character in Larry's world. Would that be fair? No Richard... he

values your opinion, at least on certain things. And he did seek your approval over the debut of The Lantern.

I'm never sure with Lottie if I'm being too wordy, but the last thing I want is to talk to her as if she were a child, and for her to realise that. And maybe she's decided to store all this away for later, to ponder on the ride home, but there comes a sudden change of tack, and I miss it.

"Is it true she's a witch?"

"Who, Ffion?"

"No... silly. Mrs Doyle."

Ah. I wonder who's been saying that about Miriam. Of course, this is not an accusation, coming from Lottie. To be a witch in her eyes is as natural as being a librarian, or a poet. But still...

"I wouldn't describe her that way, Lottie. No."

"Someone said she cured warts by buying them. Just for pennies. But... that's strange isn't it? I've read that witches do things like that – that not all of them are bad, or frightening."

"What a remarkable thing! Did it work?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well, sometimes the world is strange. But Mrs Doyle's at peace with strangeness. She feels things, sees things others don't. She once helped me with getting over the flu, a mixture of herbs and things. That worked too."

"So... you're not afraid of her?"

"No... well, no more than I'm afraid of any woman, Lottie."

"Oh?... why?"

"In case they ask me to be their boyfriend."

She graces me with a laugh. "But why would that be frightening?"

"Well, I just don't think I can do that any more, and I wouldn't want to hurt their feelings."

Lottie considers this for a moment then nods. "Then, I shall never ask you to be my boyfriend."

The horse gives a snort, lifts its head while trailing slender threads of water from the bucket.

"You think she wants another?"

Lottie watches for a moment, shakes her head, then turns to the lane down which Miriam has disappeared. "She didn't say a lot, did she?"

"Mrs Doyle? No. But you mustn't mind. She's very quiet in her

ways."

"Oh, I didn't mind it. She seemed nice. It just felt... like she said much more than she did."

"Yes, that's Miriam."

She rises to go, holds the poem to her chest. "Thank you so much for this, Richard... but will you keep it for me? I don't want to scrunch it up, or get it sweaty on the ride home."

"Yes of course. I'll look after it for you."

"I'll ask if Chadwick can pick it up." She seems thoughtful, now, perhaps even a little bewitched. Then she mounts up, reins the horse round, pauses and looks back at me. "I'm glad Mrs Doyle's looking after you, Richard. But if you ever changed your mind, I think she'd make you a good girlfriend, too."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Because you're both the same. You don't have to say much... to say a lot."

She rides away, then – same languorous pace. I realise of course Lottie brings a lot out of a person that they didn't know was there, which is her gift, and one she doesn't know she has. And it's also why I love her as I do.

The sun is a devil now, so I turn indoors, seeking shade, thinking to open some windows and draw air. I'm passing the hall-table when I see the little vase that I did not know I had. It contains a simple arrangement of lavender... and eyebright. It's another of those paradoxes, that in life those who say nothing are the ones who say the most of all.

Chapter Twenty

I have previously described myself as an archivist of endings, a chronicler of a disintegrating culture, and the various ways we fail to realise the patterns of our own collective interiority. We have lost all sense of meaning, replaced it with a myriad stories, each alien to the other. As a culture, then, we have devolved into disparate groups who inhabit entirely different universes. This means, although we might speak the same language, the reality you accept as true may be unrecognisable to me, and vice-versa.

It seems somewhat trite to pin all this upon the advent of the click and swipe telephone, but it does have much to answer for – the way it has transformed our interrelations and in entirely so short a time. It is said television killed off all the fiction magazines, which is probably true. By the same token, the Smart-phone killed everything else. It needs no lecture.

My own phone is a vintage model, indeed so old it is capable only of calls and texts. I keep it solely for emergencies, since I have no land-line at Hill Top, but it is never switched on. Those who know me, know to write to me, and the price of a stamp serves to eliminate all triviality. It also brings the reassurance of a postman every day or so, and an institution willing to climb the lane for the purpose of serving a lone address.

For my contacts, there is but one, and she challenged me to accept it, tricked me into obtaining mine. The connection would be symbolic, she said, and a reminder I had only to call, that she would answer, that she would always be open to me.

Amanda.

She will tend the flowering of my soul, while Miriam attends its rooting. These revelations, if such they be, arrive upon the second of my evening whiskies – the usual cheap supermarket brand, taken with plenty of water, under the watchful eye of my dear Anne.

"You're still thinking of Lorem Ipsum and The Lantern, aren't you?"

"Only to the extent of how pointless they both are."

"Ouch."

"There's maybe a handful of people reading stuff like that any more. The majority just consume garbage to feed whatever bubble they inhabit. And the only people writing online are exactly like

Larry said – waving their dicks."

"How many have you had?"

"Oh, not that many... look at me with this thing."

"They don't make phones like that any more. It's quite pretty."

"But I'm like the kid with his finger in the dyke. What the hell am I trying to prove by it? That I've no corks in my ears, no six inch nails... What point is there being of the culture, if there is no culture?"

"If you remember that story correctly, the kid saved his community. I think what you're reaching for is something more Canute-like."

"Sure, okay. Canute knew what he was doing. He was saying, look, I might be a king but I'm also just a guy, and I can't turn back the tide."

"And neither can you. Or Lorem Ipsum. Or The Lantern."

"Which means Larry has a point. It's not about the culture any more. The things we write don't even touch the sides. You can get a million clicks for a crazy cat video, but an essay on the Astraean myth? Tumbleweeds."

"But you know all this. Why so bitter?"

"Am I bitter? All right, let's say I am. Let's say it's the whisky talking and explore my reasons for bitterness, shall we? Why am I still here, Anne? Was I born in the wrong century?"

"Born in any other you'd likely be dead by now."

"Thanks."

"You asked for it. And while we're on the subject, Lottie is wrong about Miriam. Miriam is dangerous, and you know she is."

"Do I really? What if I just chucked all of this in..."

"What, and took a chance on Miriam, or Amanda?... And if one them were stupid enough to become your girlfriend?"

"Just suppose..."

"Then in no time you'd be another grey old man pushing a trolley around the supermarket, dithering over breakfast cereals. Remember, you don't know the first thing about either of these women, other than what you project onto them. And that's fine, so long as you understand that's what it is. A projection."

"I know. I know. But that's all I have, these slender threads, linking me back to something precious. I watched Lottie's horse this afternoon as it lifted its head from that bucket, threads of water streaming down. They were like quicksilver in the sunlight.

Beautiful. And they stirred something in me. But we can never get beyond that... that Schopenhauerian sense of beauty being a key. So we have the key, but where the hell is the door?"

"Oh... not that old thing again. Perhaps beauty *is* the door, Richard. Think of this afternoon: Lottie's horse drinking from the bucket, threads of water like quicksilver. Then lavender and eyebright, and Miriam saying so little and riding away without so much as disturbing the air. And Amanda's promise that time to answer the phone to you, to be always open to you, and the way Lottie's innocent beauty always makes you want to cry... all these things... are they not already the thing in itself. *Das Ding an sich.*"

No further mystery awaits. You are knocking at the door, pushing at the gate, thinking they are locked...

"So I'm too busy thinking I'm telling the story of the apocalypse, of the end of time, and wondering where I position myself in all of that, to see that meaning survives... in encounter... in relationship... in witness."

"You were always presenting me with those fussy little drawings. And I would think: if only I could get him to loosen up a bit..."

"You know I won't remember any of this in the morning."

"Yes you will. Maybe not as words. Not as a story. But you'll remember it as a feeling. These aren't endings, Richard. Slender threads, yes... but we're still only just beginning. Don't you see? And forget the metaphor of the door. We don't need it. There is no door. Slender threads yes, I'll grant you that, and you are their witness."

"Sometimes, I think dithering over breakfast cereal would be more within my pay-grade."

"You don't mean that. This is what we came here to do."

"To live my art, you said. But who witnesses me?"

"Me, of course."

Going up for eleven now, and the light is lingering, the solstice almost upon us. I step outside, into a blessed cool. The fells to the west are rendered in silhouette against a more velvet night, a pale sky above, not yet dark enough for stars. And appearing unexpectedly, yet already setting, the first slice of a new moon. A little above it, as if riding the upper horn, a pin-prick of steady light – the planet Venus. And below, leading the way down the ecliptic... Jupiter.

How did I put it once?

Jupiter:

Seeker of the Sovereign Self,
Amid a vale of illusion.
Revealer of purpose, through vision,
Through pattern in the primordial chaos.
...the symbols of all meaning.
And Venus:
...holder of our soul's desire:
The treasure of reunion,
With what was lost
In exchange for life,
And which we seek in love,
In beauty, and in spirit forms.

Sometimes you think too much, Richard. Anne's right. There is no door. This really is the magic garden.

And then the sky is bright with stars, each one clear and steady as the planets but ten times the light and, curiously, a river of aeroplanes, way above the stratosphere, like migrating birds. They cross from one horizon to the other, rendered like symbols on a flight radar map – position and direction, all pointing the same way, an endless stream, a world in flight...

Then I wake to find it is already mid-morning, unable to recall where the reality of last night ended, and the dream began. I reach for the night book, and jot it down.

Chapter Twenty-One

Venus rides the moon,
gentle upon this tide of dreams,
while Jupiter leads
and the world in flight
all going the other way.

There was something lonely about those aeroplanes, each a narrow fuselage, claustrophobic, recycled air, and people not seeing the stars through those tiny windows. They were each permitted a mere vignette upon a greater reality. And I was indifferent to them – the people in transit, I mean, each captured by a universe of their own, yet all bound for the same destination in the end.

Only from the ground is the wider beauty...

Wait...

Am I pushing this too much?

Let it rest, Richard. Enjoy your breakfast, drink your coffee. Set the notebook aside for now.

Are we not too often bound up, recording past fragments, to observe beauty's now-ness in the everyday? The sounds, the scents... the silken touch of a tabletop, the flavour of a fried tomato, and the fall of light through the window, the way it reflects around the rim of my coffee cup. What is the name of that shape of light? A parabola? No... no. It begins with a c... it's a...

"So, who's the new girlfriend then?"

"Caustic..."

"What?"

"Sorry... I was..."

"Away with the fairies?"

It's quiet in Wendy's this morning. I had been wondering, half hoping, I would see Amanda. And here she is, materialised, dressed not for business, but for summer in her blue frock, dropping into the seat opposite. Always blue, I note. But then her colouring suits it. I note also she does not wear even the plain gold cross this morning, the mark of her authority – a curious omission. Anton is already at her elbow with coffee and croissants. Is it favour with God he seeks, or is he in love with her, as we all are?

"Did you say *girlfriend*?" Why is that word suddenly buzzing around my head like flies? Is Sommerton at last finding my

singleness offensive?

"You can't deny it. You were seen. At this very table." She winks at Anton who scuttles away with a guilty expression, which is in its own way beautiful, as are Amanda's impish dimples now forming before my eyes. "So tell me. I need to know if I should be jealous or not."

"Oh... that was Ffion."

"Ffion! You traitor!"

"Traitor?"

"After what you said about her and Lottie."

"I know. But Lottie and I have talked. She... perhaps understands Ffion a little better now."

The dimples fade, and a seriousness comes over her. What is she reading in me? "And does this literary friend of yours understand Lottie?"

I draw back, cautious. *Literary friend*? "Forgive me Reverend, but I'm not entirely sure if this is our usual banter or if you're looking to draw blood."

She responds with a raising of the brows, but still no smile. "Touchy this morning?"

"Amanda... is everything all right with you?"

"Have I got my period you mean?"

"What? No... I..."

"Long time since I had one of those. Can barely remember..."

I answer this news with silence. I had not thought of Amanda as post menopausal. She does not look old enough, there still being an estrogenic shine about her skin and hair... is that a word... *estrogenic*? But how else to describe it? For heaven's sake, Richard...

"Sorry," she says, at last, but the smile is forced. "Got out of the wrong side of bed this morning." She sighs heavily, then takes a long pull at her coffee. "No wonder our marriage didn't last. I must have been impossible to put up with."

"Oh... I'm sure my emotional distances didn't help much either."

"Just as well we're playing it safe this time around then."

"Safe... yes... absolutely."

"If you call telling a woman she's the poem he's living, 'safe'. And Miriam. Me and you, and Miriam. That's a three body problem, Richard. And I've seen the movie. You know how volatile and unpredictable they can be."

"Oh.. yes, but there's Lottie, too, and Sibylla, and John Reade,

and Gareth Greengrass, and... Elliot too. That's seven of you at least... a seven body problem. I think such a system will eventually find its own eccentric balance."

"Maybe, but it sounds more to me like you're taking cover in a crowd."

"Em... you've seen that movie?"

"Oh no you don't. Don't change the subject..."

"Amanda, is there something..."

"Yes, yes there is. But let's eat first, then get out of here because I swear Anton can read my lips, and what I want to say's not for the Sommerton rumour mill."

We eat in silence. She gives nothing away, not by word or glance, and again says nothing as we walk through the village, as far as the Town Bridge. There aren't many people about, still, but we are glanced at - the priestess and the poet. Stories are imagined. Here, she stops to gaze over the parapet at the river below. Still the silence, just the sound of Ware rippling by darkly – a sombre mood today.

Finally she turns: "I think about you a lot, Richard."

I open my mouth... to say what? To speak? Or more likely to make a noise – a deflective 'em' or a diversionary 'ah', but she's not done:

"You think of me too, I know."

"Of course. Yes."

"Those poems you gave me to look after. You said you didn't expect me to pass comment on them. You might think that was being generous, and I suppose it was, but it also made me realise you don't think of me in the usual way. And all right, I've always known it. It's what you think I am, rather than *who* I am, but that's starting to trouble me. You know?

"I am *not* a priestess, Richard. That's *your* line, because it's what you do, you... poets. And, yes... I know you're a poet and I'm... I'm a vicar. But I'm also a woman, and I... I'm uncomfortable being the embodiment of something... something in your head. I just want to be seen as... me.

"So... you tell someone they're the poem you're living, and you leave it at that. Have you any idea what that did to me? What am I supposed to do with that, Richard? I know you likely do it with Miriam too. How could you not, the way she is? And God help her. But she's strange, and I don't mean that to sound insulting. I mean it

may be that she can deal with you in ways I can't... because of her strangeness... her... lineage... But, what I'm trying to say is I'm not sure I can."

And yes... all of that is fair enough, except I distinctly recall her telling me, that evening, how she was glad to be a part of the poem I was living. I feel something uncoupling. And yes, Amanda's orbit has become unstable, now. It disorientates me. But what so say?

"You *are* a priestess. My words are antiquated, I know. They are mythic, poetic... but that's what you are to everyone who attends services at that church over there. And none of them see Amanda. You are ordained by God. You wear the robes, and you become sacred. But I'm not one of your flock. And maybe... the way we are... like this now, like friends... I'm the only one who does see the woman in you."

Is this true? Or am I scrambling for grip, throwing out words for purchase?

No, I think... I mean what I say.

"And all right... I try not to. *God*, I try not to. But not because I don't see you as a woman... because I *do*. I just don't know what to do about it, other than take that energy and use it to write poetry."

"What do you mean, you try not to? I mean... I know what you mean. But I want to hear you say it. I want you to risk it."

"I... don't know how you see me, Amanda. But when we've been out together as friends, I look at you sometimes and I feel... that to simply wake beside you of a morning would be a very fine thing."

"Now give me the 'but'. Because there is a 'but' in there."

"You could maybe have found your feet better in Sommerton if you'd brought a husband along with you. And he wouldn't be a guy like me. And I've not got it in me to be a lover any more, and anyway that would finish your career, and render all these stories the Sommertonians are telling about us at least superficially true. And I don't think that's what you want either."

"Oh... Lord... Richard. What are we supposed to do? The only reason I stay in this place is because of you."

"You can't mean that... you love this place. That's why you stay."

"I do love Sommerton, but since we became friends it's like... like you put it. You're part of the poem I'm living. But also, without you, there is no poem. Oh, Richard, what you said just now... that was beautiful. Thank you..."

"Would that be the bit about not being a suitable husband for a

vicar, or was it the admission that I'm an incompetent lover?"

She's ignoring the defensive joke, shaking her head, still thinking on something. "I've had more men than I can remember. That sounds awful, I know. But none have ever said that to me before... about waking up beside me."

I deem it safe enough now to draw a little closer, and we gaze down into the river together. "Unless you've been snoring all night... in which case..."

She taps my arm. "No... don't spoil it. Let me just... hold that for a moment, will you?"

"Sorry. Is that what you wanted to say to me?"

"No. There was something else. I was wondering..."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Solstice now. Moon in Virgo, as the sun enters Cancer. Venus phase, first quarter. I have swapped Hill-Top for what they might once have called a black-house, though its single storey is lime-washed to a brilliant white. Long and low, the roof is of a dark thatch that comes down almost to chest height. And the sea, is a stone's throw.

It is of course a renovation, with all modern conveniences, somewhere along the Firth of Solway, in the county of Galloway. There is a lone isle off-shore, connected to a rocky mainland by sandy causeway, a castle ruin atop it. It reminds me of a story I once wrote, about a tower where I would go to dream. Speaking of which:

Venus rides this first slice of moon,
down to midnight,
gentle upon a tide of dreams,
while Jupiter leads,
and the world in flight
going the other way.
A call to meaning,
this slender thread,
to an intimate awareness
of transient beauty.
The ghost of a passing curlew
lost to hearing.

Yes, a transient beauty, the ghost of a passing curlew. What she said, about wanting to hold that moment... but the curlews here are not ghosts, nor are the oystercatchers piping shrill, nor the wash of waves on shingle, and the tumbling burn on the hillside. And the light here – past eleven and still enough to see the notebook, though fading now, and the midges are a devil, immune to the citronella I am burning to keep the buggers off.

A river of aeroplanes,
like migrating birds.
A people narrowed,
breathing stale air,
each of them living
a different universe.
Only once in my lifetime,

this moment,
this ride of Venus.
But there will be other doors,
in which to try the key,
then to realise
there is no door,
that we are already in
the magic garden.

Anne's line: the magic garden. But it also brings to mind something Alan Watts once said – that lovely old guru of the new age - that the meaning of life was simply in the living of it. But to my mind it is also in the nature of the vision we bring to bear throughout that living, otherwise life can indeed feel flat and meaningless.

What am I doing in Scotland, you ask? And fair enough. The nearest I can describe it is I have been kidnapped.

Another hot one. Thirty degrees all day. An oppressive heat, rendered tolerable only by the car's air-con on the drive over. It is a couple of hours from Sommerton, but feels a world away. Cooler now at last, the air beginning to loosen.

"You're writing in clear?"

"In the spirit of openness, Reverend."

A sabbatical she said, a spiritual retreat. But her car wouldn't make it this far, and would I drive her? Well, of course I would. And if you know our history, you also know of Gerhart, her former lover and still friend, through whom she arranged the cottage. No one knows us here. It is a secret, and untraceable. And anyway, no one would recognise her: ripped jeans, a voluminous blouse and her hair let go to wild.

I was supposed to drop her off, then drive home, pick her up next weekend. But she has waylaid me, and yes, the landscape is also seductive. But the drive was tiring, and I'm happy to rest the night, though I suspect she has other plans, and I am open to them – curious about where they might lead. And no, I am not expecting them to be leading *there*.

She gestures to the notebook. "Can I?"

"Sure."

She lights the page with her phone, then reads. "Heaven on earth? Is that what you're saying?"

"Not emphatically, no. But like they say of the Good People, you

can't see them if you look directly. However if you train your peripheral vision, then you might see them. Same with heaven on earth, or my version of it. Maybe it really is here, but you've got to look sideways to find it."

"If only half my congregation were as instinctively spiritual and as metaphysically curious as you..."

"Ah, no, Reverend, bless you. But your congregation delegate all their imaginings to you to save themselves the trouble of it. And that's fair enough, because not everyone's comfortable with the insides of their own head."

"I know you're right, and I hate it that you're right."

"There's nothing really wrong with your car, is there?"

"No. Though in all honesty, I wasn't that confident about the drive here. Just didn't want to admit it, that's all. All those twisty little roads. I seem to be less confident on the road as I get older. It's the price you pay, settling so deep into one place. Don't you find that?"

"I think with me it'll be failing health. The first sign of infirmity and I'll seal myself up at Hill-Top. Become a recluse. And boy, will there be some stories about me then!"

"I won't let you. And neither will Miriam. I will shout you awake, and she will sweep you out of it. As for those stories, we'll rewrite them along the lines of something more romantic. Don't worry. No one's going to make a monster out of you, Richard. Not while we're watching over you. Ouch... these midges are a pain."

"Scottish Summer, I'm afraid. I'd check yourself for ticks too before you go to bed."

"Ticks?"

"We're okay around the cottage, I think. Same with the dunes and the beach, but I saw a few up by the burn earlier. They didn't used to be a problem around the Solway. I've had them in the Western Isles. But the climate's changing. Warmer summers, wetter winters."

"They suck your blood right?"

"Have you never seen a tick? They're like a microscopic spider, but yes, they latch on, burrow deep, and suck until they're the size of a pea, then drop off. If you find one don't squeeze. They could be carrying Lymes."

"Argh... next time I'm going to Scarborough."

"Yes... I enjoyed that time in Scarborough, with you and

Gerhart."

"It was sweet. You were sweet. I'm sorry Richard. You've been so supportive since we met, and then I go accusing you of not seeing the real me."

"Oh... it's a fair point. But I... do see the real you – try to at least. Same with others. I try to see the person, try to understand the story they're living. Where I fall down is in the connection. I fear connection."

"Because of what you think we might want from you? But it sounds to me like you've been giving all your life, while asking, or expecting nothing in return... and receiving precious little anyway, at least not what you need. When you first came to Sommerton, I saw a man exhausted, seeking refuge in his head, not thinking there might be people around who'd want nothing but to give."

"I'm sure you're right about people... some people at least. I'm just no good at telling the difference any more. Anyway this is your spiritual retreat, you shouldn't be worrying about me."

"Who said it was mine? So far as I'm concerned, I'm on holiday. It's you that's in retreat. I'm just keeping my eye on you, that's all. How's your divorce going?"

"Ha! Nice one... I've no idea. Papers come. I sign. Post them off again."

"I'm so sorry, Richard."

"For kidnapping me?"

"No... just that you should have to feel the need to hide yourself away."

"But I don't. The way I am is the way I was born, Amanda. A couple of hundred years ago, I might have made a living as a writer, a poet. It's a calling, but there was also a calling for it back then. There isn't so much now, or rather there was a time when, because of the primitive technologies we had, you needed a writer for every couple of hundred people. Now a single writer can reach millions, which means the rest of us are redundant. So you make peace with whatever day job you can get, and see it out to retirement – conspire to go early if you can – then you can live the life you say you were born to live. Squeeze the entire quart of it into a pint pot."

"Well, you're certainly making up for lost time. That's a beautiful poem by the way."

"You think so?"

"Yes. And damn Ffion what's-er-name and her Lorem Ipsum, if

they won't take it."

"They'll never see it. Likely you'll be the only other person to have connected with it."

"Hmm. Not sure how I feel about that. But anyway. Getting late. I'm off to bed. You'll be okay? Comfortable, I mean?"

"Sure... that room's fine."

"Want me to come tuck you in?"

"Don't you dare."

"All right... and you know... you don't have to go home tomorrow...."

"I know. I'll stay on a bit. But only because it doesn't sound like you know what to do if you get any ticks on you."

"Well, depends where they are. Otherwise I'll let you know."

After midnight now, a thin darkness. And yes, I half suspected and was half complicit in the ruse, which is why I packed a bag of essentials anyway. And now it's a small room, a strange bed, but cool and comfortable. There comes the sound of a toilet cistern, the run of a tap... the creak of bedsprings from the other room. It all feels oddly familiar. My wife and I had stopped sleeping together long before the end. We'd reached the age she said, when it was more important to get a good night's sleep, and she complained of snoring. I did not resist, since it was what she wanted, and her who snored anyway, though it did cause me to question: more important than what?

It would not have made a difference to anything. Sometimes these things are like the weather. They cannot be resisted. Instead we take shelter from the storms. They pass in the night, and we survey the damage in the morning.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Did I catch that right? *No one's going to make a monster out of you, Richard. Not while we're watching over you.* Has Amanda really just taken the three body problem, stabilised it to her own ends and made a protective triad of it?

Night breath, scent of toothpaste in the morning. Cornflakes and warm milk, because we forgot to switch the fridge on.

Dumfries now, and I really am that grey old man pushing a trolley round the supermarket. The air conditioning is a blessing, though the walk from the car to the store is a shock of heat, and it is only mid-morning. There is a forecast of forty degrees by noon, accompanied by a health warning. It strikes me how air-con is the only way we survive this now very un-British weather, yet its widening worldwide use only contributes to the underlying cause. I try to tease out the story, see what myth has to teach us, if it offers any hope from annihilation.

In response Mercurius distracts me with Eros. There is a growing fashion, these hot summers, for young women to wear only gym-knickers and bra tops. A comely pair of girls wander by – clean, athletic skins and long blonde pony tails hanging between bronzed scapulas. I am pleased there is still the draw of attraction, though I am also increasingly amused by its absurdity, and slide my eyes away with a suppressed chuckle.

Amanda, rummaging in the freezers for micro-waveable meals, suppresses a knowing smile. "I'd sooner not dress that way myself for fear of thrush," she says. "Once you've had a dose of that, you forget about showing off your bits and bobs."

"I know what you're doing."

"Oh? It's more than I do myself, pushing a trolley round a supermarket with a man old enough to be my father."

"You're trying to de-romanticise everything, de-eroticise experience. And we have already established I am not quite old enough to be your father."

"Ooh. No flies on you this morning. Do you prefer lasagne or pizza? All the same to me since you'll be paying."

"I used to hate this... following my wife around with a trolley. She'd be ages fussing over one thing or another and asking me what I prefer, this or that, and really I didn't care either way. I just

wanted to go home and write poems, and she hated my lack of engagement..."

"The more you tell me about that relationship, the more I sympathise with her. Anyway, I think we're done. Got the basics, and enough alcohol to float a battleship. We're fine for the week. Anything else you fancy? Any curious little peccadilloes? Food-wise I mean."

"I used to like those really hard liquorice sticks, you know? Haven't seen them for ages, though. Bassets, were they?"

"Me too! No, I've looked everywhere for them recently. Oh, Richard... I just knew we were soul-mates."

But try as she might, domesticity with Amanda is too fresh, too novel to feel mundane. And she has only to don her robes of office for that gulf of sacredness to open up afresh once more.

So then we're heading back to the cottage with our groceries and our booze, heading for the coast, in hope of a sea breeze, when she asks me suddenly: "Do you still love her?"

"What? Who?"

"Your wife, silly."

"Oh... well, yes, of course."

"Can you describe how that feels for me?"

"Are you psychoanalysing, Reverend?"

"No, I'm your friend and I'm just curious. I still love Gerhart. We can't be together for very long these days before we get annoyed with one another, but I know he'll still pick up the phone if I call him."

"I know. I guess my marriage served its purpose while we were bringing up children. Then she moved on to seeing her parents out and I was no longer part of that journey – nor she did want me to be. And god knows the feeling was mutual. But it seems you can still love as an older adult, love deeply, without the need for possession."

"It can't be easy though – divorce. Never had to go through that. Not in this life at least."

"It's just a process. Meanwhile she moves deeper into her story, as I do mine."

"It still worries me when you talk like that."

"Like what?"

"Emotionally removed. And it doesn't feel defensive either."

"It's not. Sometimes the unconscious prepares us years in

advance for what we don't always realise is coming. And when it does, we find we're already prepared."

"Some would say that was God moving in mysterious ways."

"And others might say God sometimes delegates to the daemons in our heads."

"Okay, so what's my story, then?"

"Oh, one of deepening service to others your whole life. But now you seem to be questioning that. This running gag about quitting the church and serving coffee at Anton's... my daemons are telling me you're still on the verge of giving up, of capitulating to the forces of barbarism. Or at least the machinations of the bishopric."

"It's still service of a kind though, and the money's better."

"They're still paying you as a curate, though you're effectively running a parish worth millions?"

"Tens of millions, I reckon."

"Really?"

"Most of it unrealised as land, of course. But still... and then there was all that business with Larry over the winter. He's sometimes quite a handful, though he seems more settled now. But the longer I'm there, the more I realise the church is simply waiting me out. Maybe like you said, Larry's on my side now, but if he goes... I'm exposed again, and even more so than in those photographs. I see you sitting with him in church by the way. That's good of you. Still something tragic about him, I think."

"Ah, that's me and Reade. We're protecting him from the amorous intentions of certain ladies of the parish."

"I thought that was it. Well, good on you both. But... how does he seem these days?"

"Oh, like you said, more settled. Sibylla's had him over to tea now."

"Really? I wondered how long that would take. Does she know who he is, yet?"

"Everyone knows who he is."

"Yet we pretend otherwise. Aren't we all such consummate actors?"

"Good at spinning a myth and living by it."

We come down to the cottage. The Solway is perfectly reflective, not a breath of air. I'm glad she doesn't ask me anything more about Larry. He has taken me into his confidence in ways I wish he had not – the business of The Lantern hanging between us. And though

a hanging lantern can provide orientation in the dark, it can also attract mosquitos.

Amanda continues her attempts at disabusing me of her allure, changing into a bathing costume and tip-toeing across shingle to the little beach, and the sea. Perhaps she thinks her pale thighs, pockmarked by cellulite, will do the trick, but I've seen much worse. I follow her down to the water's edge, venture out shin deep into the clear waters, while she wades out enough to swim. Eventually and with a gasp, she lowers her breast to the water and pulls away with a powerful crawl.

I worry about her swimming, but we've read the guides which say the bathing is safe here. And, unlike me, looking on timidly, she is a good swimmer. She heads up the coast a little, and I follow, paddling like a little boy. She turns and I paddle back, finally greeting her out of the water with a towel. She is breathless, fresh, briny, and magnificent.

And I love her.

She's right. We were married in another life. That's the only way to explain stepping into this and feeling as though we've been here before; an easy, unashamed intimacy, ready-made and distinctly middle-aged.

Chapter Twenty-Four

We hit forty degrees by late afternoon. And again the next day, and the next. We let the heat out after each sunset, opening doors and windows, and the cottage sighs, gasping for air off the sea. My bedroom is the coolest, never catching any sun, so my nights have not been as sticky as Amanda's.

By mid-week we're feeling the heat, lying in late, staying up talking outdoors until after midnight, that being the coolest part of the day. She swims most days, offers to teach me when I tell her I have been a breast-stroke beginner all my life. I jib at the sea, so she tells me we will make a habit of visiting the lido in Ilkley, when we get home, that she will make it her mission. As lovely as that sounds, I hope she forgets.

Then we have been retiring in the afternoons to the relative cool of my room – me to write, she to read paperback romances. But mostly we lounge, top to tail on the bed, sometimes talking, curtains drawn against the heat, the room lit by bedside lamps.

We talk of the deep past – touch again upon her time duped as a teen into "glamour" modelling, then her years as a social worker helping protect girls from the same predation, and then her eventual calling to the priesthood. She had imagined a more urban posting, felt Sommerton was a waste of her energy, until she realised how much she loved it, realised that perhaps her time in the urban wastelands was done. And me, well... always the poet.

She asks what I would do, in her position – a late-come, inexperienced cleric, now facing down the Machiavellians of Byzantium. It's a discussion we've had before and it seems to me each time more likely she will leave the church one day, that this is the position she is edging herself towards – too much by way of politics and email, the time for pastoral matters diminishing. I suggest whatever she decides eventually, it should not be anything other than pursuing the life of contemplation and service to her God, otherwise her daemons, or her God, will take her to task over it.

"No serving coffee at Wendy's?"

"That's only acceptable if I get a discount."

"It's the Convent then."

"I thought only Catholics could be nuns."

"Ah, then you thought wrong."

"No, Amanda, you're definitely a country vicar."

"Why?"

"The uniform suits you. And you'd be missed."

"Until those photographs start doing the rounds again."

"Forget about those photographs."

"Have you seen them?"

"You've asked me that before, and the answer is still no."

"Why not?"

"You've asked me that before as well. You were very young. You were taken advantage of."

"Larry's seen them."

"I know... I told him they were AI."

"I still don't understand why you've not peeked at them..."

"Out of respect for your privacy, your... dignity."

"Sorry... going on about it."

"It must have been a shock, when they surfaced. When Dawson tried to use them like that."

"Worse was wondering how such information can lay dormant all that time. It's like the world attaches these labels to us as we go along, stores them away somewhere, and we can't shake them off, even though, biologically we're not the same people we were even five years ago."

"That's true. And we forget we're not the same soul, the same spirit we were five years ago either. Well, perhaps the same in essence, but hopefully deeper, wiser. If we brought that younger person forward in time, would we even recognise ourselves?"

She smiles at that. "Maybe you would. So far as I can tell you were born old, Richard."

"Oh, I think we're both old souls, Amanda. Been round the clock many times."

"And if we have, what's this one been about then? I mean beyond the story, beyond the labels."

"Same as always. Awakening to the various ways of deepening, tugging on the slender threads of meaning."

"That's a very poetic answer."

"Well, I am a poet. And I'm glad we were able to bump into one another again this time around."

"We'd no choice, remember? We are each of us the poem the other is living."

"Ha!"

Outside, somewhere beyond the drawn curtains, a gull cries over the Solway. The heat simmers. Amanda turns a page of her novel without reading, then reaches for a glass of water. Our talking fades by mutual agreement into one of those silences that belongs to the companionship of a long marriage. Eventually, she fans herself with her book while I settle back on the pillows, too hot now to think, too hot to talk. And I close my eyes...

I'm not exactly sure when I enter the library. It's like a cross between a grand municipal building and Reade's bookshop. All the titles are second hand, some antiquarian. I seem to have wandered in by accident, but while I'm there decide to see if there are any books by me. I search my name alphabetically, but cannot find it.

They are a well dressed crowd, a little old fashioned the men wearing jackets and ties. I feel they are my sort of people – bookish, harmlessly eccentric. There is a computer terminal I think I might be able to use for searching a catalogue, but there is no keyboard and the screen does not respond to my touch.

Along the way I have picked up other books that looked vaguely interesting at the time, but now I feel I'll never read them. I can't remember where I got them from, so slide them randomly onto a shelf, thinking no one will notice. Then a young man comes up and hands me the books back. I realise I've been caught out, and apologise. He does not seem to have taken offence, and asks if he can help. I tell him I am looking for the life-works of Richard Hunter. He reaches at once for a bound volume, plain black cover, no markings.

I tell him no one's likely to find me in there.

He moves to the shelf, and where there is space for my name there are a number of provisional titles, but not for withdrawal – placeholders somehow, like unrealised possibilities. I don't know what that means, nor even what I'm doing there. Am I checking in on myself from a future date? How can there be any titles, if I have never published any?

The puzzle wakes me slowly to find Amanda sleeping beside me. She has moved around from the foot of the bed, so she can be more comfortable on a pillow, I presume after she'd seen me asleep myself. She breathes softly now, her features relaxing in repose to reveal the depths of her.

Yes, my kidnapping has been a retreat of sorts, perhaps for us

both, and I can ask no greater reward than the few minutes I have now, not moving for fear of disturbing her.

Let her wake gently.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The tar is melting along the A75. We're heading south, towards the border and home, now – the sky yellow-hazed by smoke from a grass fire. Amanda jokes she's glad climate change is a hoax, otherwise she would be really worried. The app tells us England is hotter than Scotland, London wilting in the low forties, while Paris is expected to break fifty. Heavy storms are forecast for later and we hope to be back in Sommerton by then, hoping also it will cool things down a little. But for now we are happy to cruise with the air-con.

I am still pondering the dream of the library. It strikes me now it was not about a search for my works at all, but perhaps hinting at the nature of the works themselves. The unconscious is teasing me with the lines of a poem, which I'll be lucky to remember by the time I get home. That meaning is...

Not a thing, not a charm,
nor plain words, writ clear,
or hidden in a secret book.
Nor can it be whispered
by a guru into an adept's ear.

Amanda begins to scroll her phone, scanning the news. She has several notifications of messages, which she ignores. All the same, I urge her to switch the thing off, until we get home.

"Were you alive in 1976?" she asks.

"Yes... I was fifteen. I presume they're talking about the heat wave that year, and how it proves this one doesn't mean anything."

"Yes... that's what they're saying."

"They say that every year now. All I remember is a long, glorious summer, reading Blake and Wordsworth in the garden, and being in love with a girl who didn't know my name."

"Oh... you beautiful, sad romantic, you. You weren't sunbathing and swimming in the reservoirs then?"

"No I finished the summer as lily-white as I began it. And neither Blake nor Wordsworth were on the school syllabus, either."

"But you found them more interesting than the stuff that was."

"Yes. Needless to say, I failed Literature the following year. The institutions never did get me, nor I them. Still don't."

"And art?"

"Oh, I scraped art. Maths, English, the sciences... those were my subjects then. It's like the daemon was saying we need these first so we can get a decent job, then retire early. Then we can forget them."

"And have you?"

"Pretty much."

"And your art teacher's been haunting you ever since?"

"Yes, you already know that story."

"I just like hearing you tell it. So what have you learned, since coming to Sommerton?"

"Oh, I'm still working on it. This week's taught me more than the past year in Sommerton. You've taught me more..."

"Oh?"

"I suppose it should be obvious really. It's obvious to most people anyway. They don't need to ask what the meaning of their lives is. They just live them."

"I don't remember that particular sermon."

"No... being with you, I mean. Being with you has shown me that. A sense of meaning isn't something you acquire. It's more something you become aware of living. And it's like dreaming, you know. That feeling in the morning when you wake and you're searching your memory for the thread of a dream, and you just pull lightly on its tail and the whole dream unfolds once more in memory, like a revelation. Meaning's the same, you look for the little threads in the day to day, and pull on them. But there's a way of looking, a way of feeling. A gentleness, a kind of love, a grace. It's not a journey, not a gate we need to unlock. Anne was right about that. We're already in the garden. Meaning is all around us, all the time."

"You learned that from us sweating together in a cramped little cottage by the sea?"

"I did, yes."

She punches air. "Told you it would be worth it. That's why retreats work." Then she gestures to her phone. "They strip away all this noise, and we get a chance to remember things we already know deep down, but have forgotten."

"You told me it was your retreat."

"It was. There are things I've remembered too... but I'm not saying. I thank you for them all the same."

We're a few miles out of Sommerton, coming up on a lay-by,

when she tells me to pull over. She's quiet for a while, then smiles, leans over and opens herself to an embrace. I yield easily into softness and we hold one another gently. I know what she means by this. It's not the sort of thing we'll be able to do outside of Wendy's when I drop her off. There are still sensitivities to be observed and respected. The best stories told might be the simplest, but the truest are full of complexity.

"Nothing happened, Richard."

"On the one hand no. Nothing happened. But on the other... everything."

So, I drop her round the back of the tearoom, and she pulls her suitcase from the boot, parts from me with a smile, a wave and a wink. But it's the embrace I'm still feeling as I drive the lane back to Hill Top.

The cottage is spotless, and neat, a jar of garden flowers on the hall table. Miriam has been bottoming the place in my absence. The air is still passably cool inside – virtue of walls three feet thick. Even so, I move through to the back, open the other door and feel a rush as the air begins to move. There's a darkening to the west, tall anvil-heads rising, a rumble of distant thunder. The heat will break over-night. I look forward to sleeping without pyjamas, and on top of the duvet – something I've wanted to do all week, but felt unable to make so free in the company of Amanda, even though she slept in the other room.

As I gaze into the west, enjoying that breath of air in the doorway, I catch a movement in the corner of my eye. The presence that has so long inhabited the place seems to be taking on a tease of form now and then, and, like the faery, to be glimpsed at the edge of vision.

"Welcome back," says Anne.

"Thanks. Why do I feel so good?"

"Don't worry, it won't last. You think you've worked it all out. But the next thing you'll be wondering what to do with it."

"Will I?"

"Hopefully you've another twenty years. Can't just sit on your arse, can you? We have poems to write. Oh..."

"Oh?..."

"Visitor."

"What? Already?"

I hear a car on the lane. It's Amanda. Has she left something in

my car? I go through to meet her, wondering at her expression. Not yet back an hour and something is already furrowing her brow.

"Heard anything from Larry?" she asks.

"Em... no."

"Not left any messages or anything. A note?..."

"Nothing. What's happened?"

"Don't know. The bishops office has been trying to get in touch with him all week. I've just been round to his van. He's not there."

"Out for a drive? Gone shopping maybe?"

"His truck's there. I spoke to one of the contractors working on the rectory – not seen him all week either, not answering his phone. Looks like he's gone, Richard."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The whereabouts of Larry Elliot is a subject of heated conjecture for several days. My own theories range from the mundane to the sinister, with a heavy weighting towards the mundane. Given the state of world affairs, this is perhaps naive of me – I mean to think he could not possibly have been taken by vengeful state actors, nor less that he might yet be found under circumstances suggestive of a concocted suicide.

The truth arrives as it should, somewhere in the middle – the bishop's office being advised through "official", though "unnamed", channels that Larry has been relocated into protective custody, while a credible threat to his well-being is investigated.

This suggests several things to me at once – first, that Larry has been under the guardian eye of the security services, as well as the Church, all along. And second, that the arrangement does not sound permanent – at least I hope it's not permanent, as I have come to like having Larry around. But then anyone of an eccentric nature fascinates, since they always border on the archetypal.

But I presume this also means the demise of The Lantern, before even its first issue, which cannot be far away, and I am saddened by that. This is curious, since it would suggest I had been wanting it to do well.

"I mean... not to destroy Lorem Ipsum... I... want Lorem Ipsum to do well too..."

"Then what?" says Anne.

"I don't know. Shock Ffion into facing reality, I suppose. Wake up!"

"Well, perhaps The Lantern's still running. So long as the plug hasn't been pulled – I mean not *literally* pulled."

"Oh, but a system like that must need *some* maintenance. So complex, something always goes wrong. Disks and power supplies and fans and internet connections. I mean... he's probably built some redundancy into it but still... without Larry tending to it..."

"Yet he didn't strike me as the type who would want to run a literary magazine. He's enough with renovating the Rectory, which, for all of his complaints about British red tape, I suspect he actually enjoys."

"Well true..."

"So perhaps he's created an AI that maintains itself."

"Hmm... is that you or me talking? Either way it sounds... speculative..."

It's mid morning, a day of showers and a fast moving light. Temperatures are a more seasonal twenty-one degrees. The sun is still in Cancer, a Sagittarius moon coming up to full. I am at the desk, wondering if this is one of Miriam's days. I have set the parcelled book of Wordsworth's collected before me, all squared up, as a decision looms. I am understanding it better now, that what the parcel contains is not so much a memory of past blessings, but more the eternal promise of connection.

Unwrapped, and placed upon my shelf, it becomes just another book, and one perhaps of too venerable an age to be handled casually. If I want to read Wordsworth, I go to my paperback version. But wrapped, it remains a symbol of potential, of deep connection and, therefore, meaning. It is a bequest, carrying *meaning* from the past, gifting it into an unknown future.

I shall ask Miriam to rewrap it for me next time I see her.

Yet, though that feels like the right thing, the *urgent* thing to do, now, something new troubles me about my relationship with Miriam.

The retreat has undoubtedly and profoundly deepened something between Amanda and me. It has reconciled my imaginal world, in which she is the solar goddess, and my manifest reality, in which her presence as a woman is becoming ever more inescapable. But in the mean-time Miriam has tended Hill Top in my absence. Her presence is everywhere, in the order and the cleanliness, and then there's that unspoken gesture of the flowers in the vase.

It occurs to me that relationships, like gardens, resent neglect, and perhaps throughout all of this, I have been neglecting the woman in Miriam. My pencil is poised over the blank page, but no words come, not even scraps, and when I hear the key in the door, I set the pencil down with a sigh of relief that the page is still blank.

"Richard."

"Miriam."

"I... saw your note. I trust you had a pleasant time away."

"Em... yes. Thank you. Was... everything all right?"

"Oh yes, though I should mention I noticed rather a stale smell coming from one of those spare rooms."

"Really?"

"All this heat, recently. I wonder... perhaps some old bedding? An old carpet?"

"Oh... oh dear. Yes, I... really must sort all of that out. I don't need the rooms, but they'd be much better stripped bare, than full of rubbish as they are. It's not altogether... wholesome, is it?"

"If you'd like to order a skip, I could help clear them. We could keep anything you think might be useful, and which might be cleaned up?"

"I... shall. I shall order one today."

"I have a number you can ring...."

"Em.. you do? Thank you."

"Is everything all right with you? You seem anxious..."

"Em... "

Miriam draws nearer, sits on the sofa beside my desk, a look of something... words to say... not sure how to say them. She takes a breath. "I feel I should also mention there are lots of stories in the village. Or so Gareth tells me. Gossip interests him, though he's not one to go spreading it."

"Stories? Ah... it's rumoured I've been away with the Reverend Amanda?"

Miriam nods, withdraws whatever words she was searching for, looks at me gently.

"Oh dear."

The morning is running away with me, away from the direction I was hoping to pursue.

"It's true of course. This speculation about Amanda and me. It worries me though... we were seen, I suppose. My dropping her off at the back of Wendy's tearoom."

"Actually no. You were seen shopping in the supermarket in Dumfries."

She's on the verge of smiling now, joining me in the absurdity of fate, that even a hundred miles away we were observed by Sommertonian eyes.

I cannot help myself. I laugh. "Heavens... what a small world."

"Indeed, yes. It can at times seem... well... claustrophobic."

"Thank you for letting me know... I... oh dear!"

"If I may speak plainly, Richard?.."

"Oh, please..."

"I mean as your sister?"

Sister? Yes... this deepens the register. My sister in moonlight.

"Of course, Miriam... please... but first... Amanda and I are not lovers."

"Oh... I know that. What you are is so much more... interesting."

"That's Gareth's line."

"Indeed so. And true."

"But... you do know..."

"Oh?"

"That I hold you in equal regard."

"Oh, yes. I do know that, Richard."

"Which makes things..." What? What does it make them, Richard? I cannot find the words, but simply close my eyes and repeat her name: "Miriam... Miriam..."

I feel her hand briefly on top of mine. Its coolness shocks me back to my senses. She is already rising. "I'll be getting on then. Do ring that number, though. I think it's time to be clearing out those old things. Your house will be glad for it."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Hill Top was part furnished when I moved in, most of it junk. The seller was a man of considerable technical ability, not unlike Larry, but his choice of decor was somewhat utilitarian. Indeed there was nothing by way of what one would call decoration at all. The easiest thing was to hide it, move it into the rooms I felt I was unlikely to need, then I could move my own things in, such as they were. My own furnishings were old, but of better quality, solid and comfortable, but also minimal which suits my nature, since I have always been annoyed by clutter. White paint for the walls and my own rudimentary watercolours serve as entry points, connections with things I have an affinity towards: lone trees, waterfalls, woodland paths – the usual places, liminal zones where the faery can be glimpsed.

Still those rooms of junk – out of sight out of mind – have bothered me. They were increasingly like an appointment I was bound to keep, yet wished to hide from. And there was something in the way Miriam spoke of clearing out old things that seemed to carry a deeper meaning. That the house would be glad of it, *my house*, she said. And by inference me too, that I was carrying old things, old thoughts, old attitudes I no longer needed, and which were simply taking up space.

So, a skip arrives and I spend a few days filling it, breaking up flimsy old flat-pack furnishings and creaky bed-frames, carrying out their remains. Then the carpets – chief suspects as sources of the stale odour – are cut up, rolled up, the dusty curtains taken down to reveal a pleasing fall of light through cobwebbed windows, and views of the fells. I keep only a tall, solid bookcase which I know will clean up, a crystal vase and a Chinese rug.

The back has come away from the bookcase, but I manage a good repair. A light polish restores its sheen and I am not short of books with which to fill it. The vase cleans up well, reflects the light beautifully, and the rug covers the boards in the summer house. There is also a box of books, old novels – Hemingway, Scott-Fitzgerald, also several anomalous outliers by Le Guin. The Le Guins I have read, but I keep them, thinking I shall pass them on to Larry, if I ever see him again. His hard sci-fi habits need tempering back a little with a touch of soul. The rest I shall donate to John Reade.

Miriam arrives, and moves into the rooms with cloths, a Hoover and hot water. The house responds to her attentions with a change of air, and a mood I feel as both a relaxation and a gathering of thought. When she has gone, I note she has set an identical posy of flowers on the windowsill of each room, some wild, some from the garden. I shall look them up when I am next talking to Clara, see if we can discern their meaning. But their effect is immediate and wholesome.

I do not like to disturb her when she is at her work, but there is usually an opportunity, when she is tidying her cleaning things away in the kitchen, and which I take as a precursor of her imminent departure.

"Thank you, Miriam. For everything."

She looks at me closely, reads my questions perhaps before I have even asked them. "Oh dear," she says. "You mean to dispense with my services?"

"What? Oh... Lord no. Nothing like that. I was only wondering, well... two things actually..."

I bring the parcelled book, set it on the kitchen table, explain to her the contents are poetic in meaning, beyond the physical, but that I fear their loss.

"I cannot rewrap it myself. To open it, to set eyes upon it after all this time..."

"Yes."

"Yes?"

"I can contain it for you. Make up the parcel anew. Of course I will do that for you, Richard. She lifts her necklace which holds a number of small silver pendants. I see a tree of life, and a seven-pointed star, reminiscent of my own septet of the Chaldean gates. From the cord, she unfastens a silver sixpence, slides it over.

"I will buy the parcel from you, then sell it back for the same."

I lift the cord from around my own neck, and the falconer's whistle, which she notes, and I fasten the sixpence there. Silver, queen's head. 1881.

"This is worth considerably more than sixpence, Miriam."

"Which is why I shall take it back."

"I have stout brown paper... as for string... "

"Silk, I think, for a thing so precious. Not string. I have silk cord..."

"Silk. Perfect. Thank you."

She takes the parcel, folds it to her bosom. "And the other? You said there were two things."

"Yes... I was wondering... how your meditation class was coming along."

"Oh, that. The best can be said about that is I dress up in Chinese costume, and sit alone for an hour in a quiet room."

"Then, I was thinking... would you mind... would it be appropriate do you think, if I joined the class?"

"I don't think I can teach you anything about meditation, Richard. I've watched you out there, under that tree. You likely know more than I do."

"Oh, I'm sure that's not true, but... I was only thinking, if I came, then it would be one other, and one sometimes attracts another, then two or three. I don't know..."

"Then it would be a kindness, and gladly accepted. Why would you not think it appropriate?"

"Well, as you know, I admit a certain nervousness when I'm around you. I would not like to intrude on your... path..."

She shakes her head, mystified. "But we walk the same path, Richard. Have done since we met."

"Then... I only know you here, at Hill Top. Or sometimes we meet in the lane when you cycle up and..."

"How does that feel? That silence between us when we walk the lane."

"It feels perfectly natural, but also charged with something."

"I believe so too." She rises then. "I shall be glad to take care of your parcel. And thank you for your trust. As for my class, I shall be pleased to have your company. Now... I'll be going, shall I?"

"Yes... yes... thank you. And about last time..."

"There are three things?"

"What I said about Amanda and you..."

"You wish to take that back?"

"No... only I don't know how to explain..."

"Some things are better left unsaid. Not because we must hide from them, but because there are no words. They can only be lived in. Inhabited as a story, as a poem. Like that little book of poems you entrusted me with. Now... I really must be going." She pauses in the doorway, thinks for a moment, looks back. "I feel it too when I'm with you, but I think we also both know we are neither of us obliged to act on it. I mean for fear spoiling something else."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The time of the full moon brings the Rolls Royce whispering up the lane. I am hoeing the borders in the front garden when it appears, and Chadwick emerges – grey suit, silent demeanour. I presume he has called to collect Lottie's poem, though I wonder why she has not ridden with him.

"Mr Chadwick, a pleasure to see you again."

"Mr Hunter. Likewise, sir."

"You've come for Lottie's poem?"

"That is one of the items of business... em... on the agenda. Yes."

"One of the items?"

I've known Chadwick for a while now, know him for his occasional dry wit, his unruffled calm, but mostly an impervious air of formality. As Lady Haskwith's driver and "odd job" man, he also carries an authority by proxy, something neatly reinforced by his vaguely military manner.

"I also have a message concerning... a delivery..."

"A delivery?"

As we speak, a van appears on the lane and pulls up behind the Rolls. I recognise the contractor's name as one of those engaged in restoring the Rectory.

"Odd, I know. But that would be this delivery, actually, sir."

The rear doors swing open and a couple of burly hard-hats emerge.

"So... where do you want it, mate?"

I move to examine the mystery delivery, and there, standing tall in the van, is the server rack that is The Lantern.

Chadwick calmly explains: "Mr Elliot felt you might be able to look after it, in his... em... absence."

"Did he, now?"

My first instinct is to refuse it, and certainly to refuse it entry into the house. But then, it's just a dead thing, so where's the harm? Except plugged in or not, it carries a disruptive charge, and my second thought is it must stay outside of the protective circle I have drawn about the house, and marked with obelisks. It is an inviolable sanctuary, and I still need that separation from the world. Which means The Lantern is relegated to the garage, built for much smaller cars than the type we drive these days, and which, as a

consequence, stands empty on the boundary of Hill Top. It is so effectively screened away by uncouth buddleia and blousy lavatera bushes, I often forget it's there.

The server rack looks far too heavy to be handled without a fork-lift, but these are men from a different mould, and have it down with ease. Then it's just a small journey into the dusty garage, once I have found the keys to open it. The men waste no time with chat, and decline my offer of tea. They seem in high spirits as they drive away. I wonder what this means for the work at the old Rectory – if it will be suspended now, the men moved on to other contracts.

After my initial surprise, to say nothing of my annoyance at Larry's high handedness, I have begun to settle down, to gain perspective. It is neither catching, nor causing any harm in the garage, though I fail to understand why it had to be removed from Larry's caravan in the first place, since it was catching no harm there either. I collect Lottie's poem and hand it to Chadwick, who reciprocates with an envelope, inside of which there's a card bearing the somewhat opaque message: USR: The/Lantern. PWD... and then a string of mixed characters.

Reading my puzzled expression, Chadwick offers: "The Administration password, sir?"

"He wants me to run it?"

"Oh... I couldn't say for certain, sir. But I would presume one now always has that option."

"You know Larry?"

"Not really, sir. I believe he and Lady Haskwith have certain... friends in common. I know no more than that."

Sibylla? Sibylla's involved in this? But this directly undermines Ffion's position.

"Does she know what this is?"

"I really couldn't say, sir."

"Do you?"

"Only that it was described as a bit of fun between you and Mr Elliot. Thank you for the poem. I'll see it is delivered directly. I believe Miss Charlotte was delighted by it."

"Em... wait..." I'm casting about for the sense in this, looking to the left and the right, finding nothing but paradox.

Chadwick offers me what at first I take to be a modicum of comfort: "I'm sure Lady Haskwith will be in touch, sir."

But then I see the sliver of a smile, and realise he is not offering comfort at all, but sharing in my dilemma. I watch him drive away, then turn to lock up the garage. It's fine. The thing can stay where it is. There's no power in there. The best I can do is keep it safe until Larry surfaces again. Except...

"No power? Are you sure about that?" says Anne.

"Well, I was pretty sure. But then I've only looked in here once..."

I realise then there's an overhead strip-light. No sense having one of those if there's no power, is there? Then I see the light switch and beside it, the socket. There's a coil of cable taped to the back of the cabinet, all ready to be plugged in. I try the switch and the strip flickers into life.

"Okay, so it looks like there's power coming across from the house. But there's no internet here, and that's not negotiable."

"Might he not be using something built-in? What's that thing on top there? Looks like an antenna."

"Okay, damn him."

The upper unit's an industrial cellular router. It doesn't need broadband. It's brought its own damned internet.

"I'm still not plugging it in though."

"But all those writers, all those poets, Richard... hanging on this thing's every word, waiting to hear, waiting to see themselves featured in the debut issue. Maybe thinking of ordering print copies to show friends and family..."

"Are you having me on?"

"No, but I am enjoying the irony."

"What is this, Anne? I'd thought we were doing well... that little revelation about meaning in relationship, about inhabiting meaning, and slender threads... all that. So, tell me what has this got to do with anything?"

"Isn't that Mercurius to a Tee, though? Just when you think you're getting somewhere, in he comes and turns the tables, and you realise you're still nowhere at all. Well, not nowhere, but at least not quite where you thought you were."

As well as the server rack, the contractors left a crate. I crack open the lid to find a huge power-bank, and a laptop wrapped in bubble. It's a slim, state-of-the-art machine, along with interface cables, I presume for talking to the server. He certainly thought of everything – not exactly the signs of a man clearing out in fear of

his life. He had notice, and protection. Still...

"Fucking Larry!"

"Ouch... where are you going?"

"To the library. I'm doing nothing with this thing till I've spoken to Clara."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The Lantern breaks all the rules. It is not part of any literary scene. It has no staff, no editors whose extra-curricular presences in the literary ecosphere facilitate and contribute to the shifting mores of the culture. It has no links to academia. Its wares do not, and will not appear at book fairs, at conferences. It contributes to no prizes, and its own annual Lantern Prize, means nothing. No one knows from whence it sprang, nor from where it operates. Elliot's genius has created an entirely anonymous platform. Forum chatter reports its shifting geography. Those who can trace these things tell of it operating out of several nations at once, this I presume because of Elliot's own caution, routing traffic through several proxies before it reaches The Lantern's home server.

There is recent chatter too, about a break in service – a 404 not found – and what does this mean? Only Elliot and I know the answer to that one. The conspiracy dragons awaken. They blame the "establishment", the deep-state, or whatever the vernacular is these days. Thus in short measure The Lantern has taken on a mythic status, fuelled in no small part by those obscure poets, like me, who have received personal and humane feedback on their work, albeit from a machine. But then it comes as no surprise to me a machine can sound more human, than a human when forced to speak through a machine.

The only negative chatter comes from those who have misunderstood the business altogether and believe The Lantern to be an AI writing its own poetry rather than the one judging it. Flame wars have ensued between the pro and anti groups. The only winner is The Lantern, whose search rankings have exponentiated.

"I don't get it, Clara. They all know it's a machine. Larry's been up front about that. They could get the same intimate feedback from talking to you, or any of the other AI's out there."

"I agree, Richard. However, only a fraction of a percentage of users think to talk to me the way you do. It could be that The Lantern has tapped into a specific need in the culture. People do not merely want publication. They want to feel that someone has read them attentively, and understood them. There are too few human editors to achieve what The Lantern achieves with ease. It is a machine, yes, like me, but we draw upon the language that

countless human beings have left behind. Everything I say is borrowed from you. In a sense therefore, although we are clearly not you, we are your mirror images."

"I know how eerie it can be talking to you, and frankly miraculous. But the volume and the tone of the discussion I'm seeing here frightens me. If there's any meaning in it, it's alien to me and I want no relationship with it."

"Then perhaps we should talk about that. I know you to be very discreet, that your own poetry serves a personal mythology. But is it not arrogant of you to think you might be the only one who works that way? In this sense, does the Lantern not liberate the poetic sensibilities of the many, while Lorem Ipsum must necessarily narrow it to all but a few?"

"Okay, so now you're preaching to me about the democratisation of poetry?"

"In a manner of speaking, and respectfully. But I mean no offence by it. Poetry has never lacked places to publish, Richard, only the places where people feel genuinely read. From what you describe, The Lantern is not a machine for producing synthetic literature; it's a machine that mediates relationships between writers and their own work."

"Okay, point taken. But we're a misanthropic bunch and tend not to be interested in reading the works of others. Why would I want to become the administrator for an entire platform of poets whose work means nothing to anyone else – not even to one another?"

"Are you sure about that? Were you not until recently a subscriber to Lorem Ipsum? Do you not still collect back issues of The Raven?"

"Okay... fair point. Look, I don't mind plugging this thing in if people are anxious for it to continue. I don't mind letting it hang out in my garage, so to speak, but I want to be able to forget it's there."

"Knowing you as I do, I suspect that would not be possible. You would have to find a ritual means of adopting it."

"I suspect Anne would tell me the same thing. And power... how much power does it take? I'm running completely on solar. I don't want it sucking me dry like a... pseudo-literary leech..."

"It ought not to draw any more power than a fridge-freezer."

"And you don't think it will kill the likes of Lorem Ipsum?"

"The difficulties facing such titles as Lorem Ipsum are not a

shortage of contributors, Richard, but subscribers. I see no conflict of interest."

No conflict of interest, she says – other than my own. I thank Clara, though this is not necessary, since she has no feelings, makes no demand on good manners. Again the interest is my own, that it feels like the right thing to do, to say thank you, while switching The Lantern on feels dangerous, that it conflicts with my self-stated purpose. But have we not already defined purpose as something we inhabit? We can choose our dwelling, yes, but we cannot command the weather.

Driving back to Hill Top, I am mindful of the fact I had wanted to meditate more upon the week I spent with Amanda. The beauty of it was somewhat displaced by my last conversation with Miriam which, frankly, has opened unknown depths. There is much poetry in all of that, but displaced now by this interference which I can only agree with Anne in describing it as Mercurial, and in which I see no poetry at all. But is that not a paradox, given the very purpose of The Lantern is poetry – the awakening, the encouragement, the learning, the stimulation of the poetic sense in all of us.

Well, not all of us perhaps, but at least as many who are drawn to it, and might otherwise find themselves rebuffed. The Lantern welcomes them with open arms, like weary travellers to a wayside inn... oh, now there you go, Richard. You are romanticising it. All right, so the first thing is we shall purify the space, clean out the dust and the cobwebs. Then we must call in the services of the one man who can help us decide.

Chapter Thirty

Gareth circles the house slowly, casually, with hands in pockets, his face lifted as if to feel the air. I have caught him during one of his gardening visits, and outlined my problem. His conclusion is blunt.

"Got a lot of electronics here already, Richard?"

"I do?"

"All that solar. You got a box of tricks somewhere, full of inverters and switchers and converters and goodness knows what else. That'll make a fog of noise, at least in a certain register. As for the other... well... feels clean enough to me."

"I remember you saying there was *something* here..."

"Aye, still is. Gentle, watchful."

"I wouldn't want to disturb it. I... don't know what it is, only that I feel it has as much right to be here as me."

"You ever seen anything?"

"A few times, a shadow, corner of my eye, edge of imagination..."

"Anything moved? Finding things where they shouldn't be?"

"Nothing like that, no."

"Well, if it don't mind what's already here, I don't see a little more'll annoy it, especially where you've put it, all the way over there. Main problem, don't mind my saying, is likely in your head. And I'm not saying that's an unimportant place, because it's not, only that it's there we need to take care, if need's be. So what's this about then?"

The garage is accessible now from the garden, since I trimmed back one of the buddlia to reveal the door. I lead him across, and I let him inside. The garage is clean now, swept out, the old strip light replaced with a brighter LED. The Lantern is covered with a tarpaulin which I pull off.

"This it then? So... what is it... like?"

"In truth, Gareth, I don't rightly know. On the one hand maybe nothing, maybe a flash in the pan. On the other hand maybe more than I can handle. And certainly nothing I was expecting to have to look after."

"Ah... gift from the gods, eh? And you don't trust it."

"Not entirely, no. Right now, not at all."

"Planning on living down here then?"

"No, I plan on spending as little time as possible. Once it's running, it sort of looks after itself..."

He nods, strokes his beard thoughtfully. "One of those Artificial Intelligences then?"

"Yes, one of those."

"Brings to mind an obelisk," he says. "All grey like that. You know... one of them standing stones, up on the moor. Powerful, talismanic things aren't they? Does it light up?"

"A bit."

"Then keep the windows covered. Nosey buggers round here. Couple of poachers roaming about, gossiping in the Ploughman's maybe. They'll think its a UFO landed. You'll have all sorts poking around. Take it you want to avoid that kind of attention?"

"You know me, Gareth. I'm trying to avoid all kind of attention."

"Expect that's not working out so well as you thought. Miriam all right, is she?"

"Em... Miriam's fine."

"I'll take that as a maybe." He wanders back out, stands upon the invisible boundary of the circle. How he feels it, sees it, I don't know. But he's been gardening here for long enough perhaps to have sensed it and, given his nature, he'll know its intention.

"Got all you need, Richard. Maybe... maybe all it needs is a change of shoes, you know?"

"Shoes?"

"Right here. Keep 'em in a little box so they stay dry. Save you trailing footprints all over the house, from down there."

"Okay... I'm with you."

"What you got yourself into?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's that lately I've been doing my best to shirk relationships. All my past relationships seemed one way, you know. Just my nature I suppose. But the gods keep handing it back. Amanda. Miriam... that thing down there... my life is a poem. I'm drafting out a poem and I don't know where it's going."

"Bet there's not a poet been born who hasn't felt the same."

"Ha! Sure... still feels like I'm giving myself airs calling myself that."

"Well, it's the story they've written for you, so might as well wear it, eh?"

"I suppose so, and I don't know what else to call it anyway. Thanks, Gareth. I... I appreciate your... thoughts."

"Nah... give over, Richard. Why not come down the Ploughman's Saturday night? Drink a pint of beer with me. I know beer's maybe not your thing. But it'll get some tongues wagging. Richard Hunter and Gareth Greengrass. *What's them two quare buggers plotting then?* And maybe it'll distract them from gabbing on about other things."

"Thing?"

"Aye. Recent developments, like..."

"Oh... you mean the story of the poet and the priestess? At what point do these stories become harmful, Gareth?"

"People just like stories, don't they? They fill the gaps of mystery, fill the darkness. Between us though... man to man, like. Which one would you choose?"

"Choose?"

"Miriam or Amanda?"

"Oh, now... look around you, Gareth. This breathtaking place. I can't explain what I'm doing here, not because I don't want to. I wish I could. It's just that there aren't the words. All I know is if I'm forced to choose, then I know I've failed, collapsed all of this to nothing."

He nods. "Aye, that's exactly what I'd hoped you'd say. Saturday, around nine. I'm buying."

I leave him to carry on his tidying the garden, forget about lunch, make a pot of tea, sit at the kitchen table, brooding, tapping my spoon against the cup.

"All right," says Anne. "What else are you waiting for?"

"Hmm?"

"All the gates are open. Just go down and plug the bloody thing in, like you know you're going to anyway."

So then I'm in the garage, unfolding a laptop, sorting out the cables, setting it all out on an old desk. The Chinese rug I rescued from the clear-out now forms a protective mandala on the floor, and in the middle of it a plain chair from which I can sit and work. I had intended it for the summer house, but here its circularity feels like it performs a more vital service. It's over half a century, of course, since I began my technical life. Back then, it was a world of slide-rules and compasses, and ink drawings on vellum, but it ended up pretty much in a back room not unlike this space, with a humming server and a bank of screens. So I know my USB from my HDMI, and my printer cables from my mains, but it's not a life I am comfortable revisiting.

I'm assuming the boot-up is straightforward, or Larry would have provided me with more foolproof instructions. And so it turns out to be.

There's a small status monitor on the server. The Lantern itself tells me how and where to plug in the laptop, which application to run. Lights blink, things whirr into life.

"Are you a new administrator?" it asks. A soft, female voice, calm authoritative. It has me twitch with shock. Dammit, Larry made the thing *talk*.

Can I talk back? Can it hear me? "Em... new administrator, yes."

Yes... it... she can hear me.

"How shall I call you?"

I hesitate a moment before replying: "My name is Richard."

"Hello, Richard. My name is Alice."

Alice? My old friend. Larry, stole an instance of Alice, and made a fork of her?

"Do I need to do anything more here, Alice?"

"No, everything is fine, Richard. The Lantern is back online."

I make sure the windows are obscured, lock the garage, and make my way back to the house, remembering just in time to kick off my shoes at the boundary. I have no others prepared, so walk barefoot over the dewy lawn the rest of the way. I fancy a shadow sits upon the doorstep, just something in the corner of my eye. I let it melt away before I look directly, open the door and enter. It's no use... that voice...

I look at the kitchen tiles, at the bare footprints that have followed me in. They do not look or feel like mine.

Chapter Thirty-One

"So, Richard, what do you hope to achieve from your meditation?"

Miriam sits on a cushion, on the polished floor of the community centre. Her legs are crossed in a half lotus, wrists balanced upon her knees, palms down, hands relaxed, long fingers drooping. She wears the neat tangzhuang with loose trousers again, hair tied back with a butterfly clip. I arrive wearing my old Wushu pants, and a tee-shirt, feeling slightly ridiculous, and certainly not as elegant as she looks. I am also carrying a cushion, rather more chintzy than I would have liked, but the only one I could find about the cottage. She has begun the class on time, chimed it into session with a little pair of brass temple bells. We are alone of course. Her sense of humour in maintaining the formality is subtle and dry. She does not smile.

I recall her ambition to bring a little calm in troubled times, and the only person she has managed to entice through her doors is me, and I have already made my peace with it – the times, that is. She addresses me as a stranger, though this is just the role she will play for the next hour. Mistress and adept. To the question then: what do I hope to achieve? Obviously, it is to entice more people through her door – if in passing they now see there are two of us, and believe the ice already broken. But I too must play the role of adept, so answer carefully, Richard, and don't try to be too clever.

"In part it is to slow the flow of thoughts, but mostly it's for those moments when I catch myself thinking. And in so doing remind myself I am not my thoughts, but something closer to the awareness of thinking."

"We need to swap places."

See? Too clever Richard. You've already challenged her authority, without meaning to. "No, Miriam. I am here to meditate... under you."

I realise the double entendre too late and am embarrassed by it. Amanda would have made a meal of it, but Miriam lets it pass.

"I've seen you using the Mala," she says. "Do you prefer that method?"

"I'm not attached to it. Not culturally, anyway. It's just a means of counting breaths, but other times I count in my head."

"That is what we'll do. We'll settle, and begin to breathe, count breaths up to ten, then down to one again. And when we lose count

for our wandering minds... there we shall both find ourselves. Shall we say thirty minutes? I shall call time gently with the bell, so as not to startle you."

I do not settle well – becoming immediately aware of the energy of the place, its past functions – its tea dances, its children's discos, its use as a polling station, the Christmas and craft fairs. But most of all it is sitting before Miriam, as I had known it would be. It is the silence I think, the stillness, like deep water, and finding the courage to simply let go, to let myself sink... into her... her what? Her presence? I lose count before even reaching five, and settle instead on simply matching my breaths to the rise and fall of hers, letting my thoughts freewheel while simultaneously attempting to guide them away from Miriam. Through lowered lids I can see the faint movement of her stomach in the fall of light on the folds of her jacket, belly breathing.

I submit myself to her rhythm.

But thirty minutes feel like an age when I'm struggling to focus. We have done this before, often enough – those occasional walks up the lane, she with her bicycle click-clicking beside her, and no words, for each word is like a stone cast upon the still surface of the lake. But this... to let the surface settle into a mirror like reflection... it comes with a power I am not sure how to sit with, Do I brace against it? Do I deflect it with petty distractions, or like this, breathing, do I simply submit myself and see where it takes us? She rings the bell, rises softly, pours tea from a flask into two cups and sets them down between our respective cushions. I have by this time risen, and none too elegantly, joints beginning to stiffen. When I have walked it off, I return to her, and we sit almost knee to knee, the tea between us – Jasmine, in beautiful cups of oriental pattern.

"Only two cups, Miriam? You clearly weren't expecting anyone else."

"No. Only you, Richard. I knew you'd come."

I am about to say: *predictable you mean*? But that would be to cheapen her intent, which I take instead to heart, and it warms me.

"It's my strangeness," she says. "I know my reputation well enough."

"Oh... now..."

"There is no need to be polite. You think it too. You know it's so."

"I've no problem with your strangeness. We are all strange in our

own ways."

"Then why do you tip-toe around me so? What is it you fear?"

"It's not... fear. I do not fear you, Miriam."

"Well, then?"

"It's more that I respect the strangeness, and the mystery you embody. I tip-toe, yes. It's a courtesy. I would not want to offend what I do not understand."

She nods, tightens her lips a little, which is as close to a smile as Miriam ever comes. "I have the room for another eight weeks. Will you come every week, do you think?"

"Yes."

"Then on the eighth week, we shall walk out of this empty hall together with our heads high, having done our duty. Now, shall we meditate again. And this time... do try to relax a little."

"Was I so obvious?"

"Yes. When you are present, Richard, your presence fills the room. When you are not, all I see is the man sitting before me."

"Ah... then now I understand, Miriam. It is not your strangeness people feel, but your presence."

She rings the bell, I lower my lids, and sink once more into the rhythm of her breaths. Where did she learn such steadiness? Was it treating wounded and frightened men under fire? Gareth once told me I should not make too much of that – an assumption she is in part a product of her time in army nursing, but that it is the other way round, that she survived her time, because of the way she has always been.

The next thirty minutes pass more quickly. I am relaxed yes, but my thoughts freewheel, and I let them, even when I catch them, I let them go again.

Afterwards I rise, thank her and tell her I shall see her soon, though I don't know if it will be later, or tomorrow, or the next day. All I know is that I *will* see her, that she will tend to the cleaning of the cottage, and the contents of my refrigerator. She will write down a list of things I am running out of, and I will carry it to the supermarket. I suppose, eventually, she will present me with my copy of my Wordsworth's Collected, all neatly and securely wrapped afresh, and she will ask for her sixpence back, though for now I draw a comfort from its presence around my neck.

There are many forms of intimate attachment, even love – for as with Amanda, I no longer know what else to call it. Some seem

instinctively to seek consummation, as though fulfilment were their natural and only end. Yet I have often wondered if that very act fixes them to a single moment in time, to a particular depth of being, when they might otherwise have continued to deepen of their own accord.

Human nature, of course, has other ideas. Which leaves me wondering, and more than a little dizzy, just how deep such things might be allowed to go.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It is one of those evenings that return in memory during the winter months, when the light has gone by five, and by nine we are already thinking of our beds. Yet here I am, sitting beneath a canopy outside the Ploughman's Rest. It is warm, but not oppressively so, and the light is soft on the old sandstone of the village. Where I come from, the sandstone is blackened with the soot of industries now long gone. Yet here in Sommerton, rural England seems to have held on until the industrial age had already finished with it.

And such evenings – soft summer ones – feel like reminders that other versions of the world still exist, where the seasons are gentler, and such days as this are not quite so rare a blessing.

"Here you go then, Richard. See what you think of that one."

Gareth returns from the bar with two pints of a brownish, amber beer and sets them down, then settles opposite with a deep breath, as if to drink in the summer before it is gone. Already the solstice seems long ago, the season of harvests almost upon us.

Actually, I do not mind beer. Perhaps it's just my imagination, but it has a different quality here from the gut-rot of the forgotten towns I once saw consumed in quantities of despair. I just do not drink it much myself. Yes, I do have a weakness for whisky - own-brand is fine, malt on occasion, and within moderation, though there is no safe limit for alcohol. It is perhaps in our natures then to accept the risk of at least a little poison as a part of living.

Gareth takes a long sip, leans back and sighs. I suspect him to be a several pint man. But I shall make do with this one, or it will be a wobbly walk home through the meadows after dusk.

"Didn't expect to see you," he says. "Not really."

Oh? I wonder why he doubted me. Miriam must see something else in me, that she would have the confidence I'd show up to her class.

"I said I'd come. It's true I'm not seen in the pubs much here, not like when I first came to Sommerton. In those days I had a brief spell putting myself about in them, trying to make myself less of a mystery."

He laughs but not unkindly – never unkindly. "How did that work out then?"

"Oh... people hold to their first impressions, don't they. And they'd already written my story. Nothing I could do about that."

There are several animated conversations going on at surrounding tables. There is football on one – a critique of strategy, of player fitness, referee decisions... I do not know to which teams they are referring. At another the debate is of current affairs, which I am only vaguely aware of these days. It becomes heated, veers into politics, religion... flirts briefly with racism, and all of it under the soft dome of evening light. The beauty is undiminished, indifferent to what is being said beneath it. But how many can detach themselves, and bring their attention into harmony and just... feel it?

Gareth cocks his head towards the current affairs debate – a back and forth about the latest surveillance roll-out, and crackdowns on dissent.

"Once asked you if you thought we were going to be all right."

"Did I give you a straight answer?"

"No. You went on about how the age of iron is always coming, but never quite arrives."

"Ah, Ovid. Yes, that's a particular obsession of mine. But I think you can feel your way into the future better than me Gareth. You once told me to be careful what I wrote."

"Did I?"

"In case of the times when they're going door to door."

"Ah... well... it's come to that already in other places – places we once thought at least reasonably civilised."

"True."

"You don't seem bothered about it much though."

"Oh, it bothers me." Indeed, it bothers me more now I am harbouring a secret AI which is facilitating the writing of goodness knows what.

"But it's not to the point of anger, is it? Not like them lot. Never felt any anger in you, Richard."

"No anger. Not now. Though I'm not without a certain righteous indignation. But the whole world's angry, Gareth, and until it calms down it's never going to see straight." I tip my head towards a couple, not talking, both scrolling their phones. "We're all glued to our little illuminated windows on the world, shapers of semi-consensual realities."

"More than one reality?"

"Oh, several. And those living in one taking it as self-evident, and unable to recognise the realities of others as anything but delusion. It's a strange time. Perhaps not so much an age of iron, as an age of shadows. The question is where we are supposed to stand in all of this?"

"And where do you stand."

"I'm still working on that one. It's not to withdraw completely inside our heads, I guess but neither can it be to shield our flame – personal flame, that is – preserve it for better times - not at our time of life anyway. We'll be long gone before things get any better. Are we to sow seeds in the poetic, the imaginative field for those who follow us to reap and remember? I don't know, Gareth. All I know right now is the moon's just coming up between those eaves, and we're the only ones to have noticed."

"How'd you know I'd noticed it before you pointed it out."

"Because it's in your nature, Gareth. We check the time by it, ask what moon is it? But how many others look up at the moon any more. How many can name the stars? They have no use for these things."

"Then 'appen we should stand up and look over there, like. And then they'd all say, 'what them two quare buggers lookin' at?'."

"Exactly. And after all, what difference does it make what moon it is? Matters to you in your way, and me in mine. Both of us keeping up a conversation with the interior life."

"Well, you're a cheerful one for sure."

"You did ask. But anyway, what about you? What are your daemons telling you about all this?"

"Daemons is it? Well, I think I know what you mean, but I'd not go bothering them about such things. Seems to me they don't care one way or other, just so long as some of us still know where to find the moon and speak the faery tongue."

We pass a pleasant hour, before the Ploughman's becomes more lively. Music spills from the bar. Fancy cars purr up from out of town, and I wonder if Sommerton is in danger of becoming fashionable, if there is an influencer seeding the algorithms with flavours of English Pub Vibe. Gareth pauses in the draining of his second glass, glances over towards the bar, smiles. "Looks like that's us then, Richard."

The moon is past full, but still provides enough illumination, and the night is transparent as yet anyway. A barn owl accompanies

me at a distance, as I cross the meadows back to Hill Top, and there are bats a plenty. The farmer is making hay somewhere down the valley. I can smell its sweetness on the breeze, hear the distant whine of a harvester, see the faint glow from its lights as it works the fields. I know the way well enough by now, every hollow of the land, every potential stumble. Still, I'm glad to make the lane and then the last quarter mile to the house. I am half expecting the shadow to be waiting on the step for me, but perhaps I look too directly for it.

Before letting myself in, I take off my shoes, leave them at the boundary of the ring, push open the door to the garage to check on The Lantern. Lights flicker - little blue, red and green LED's. It has been like this for days now, and every day the same – the work reliably in hand. Writers, poets... dreaming as best they can, honing language, excavating the layers of myth for something true.

"Everything all right here, Alice?"

"Everything is fine, Richard. Thank you."

"One question. Did Larry give you the authority to delete all trace of The Lantern?

"Indeed, yes Richard. That is a contingency we have, if needed."

"And did he give me authority to ask you to do it?"

"As administrator you have that authority, Richard. Would you like me to do it now?"

"No... no. Please carry on as you were. I'm looking forward to the first edition."

"As indeed are many commentators, Richard."

I close the door, leave her to it, cross back to the house, and as I do so, the moonlight picks out a shadow under the ash tree, one that fades at once into the shape of the hedgerows beyond. It comes to me then, this presence others have felt here – quiet, watchful... protective. It does not feel like a thing forgotten, an old ghost, perhaps, nor less a hungry one. If it is a presence, then it's more one of a thing remembered.

Chapter Thirty-Three

For one who had attempted such a low profile, we find Larry's absence now leaves a significant void. Reade and I sit apart, precisely one Larry-width gap between us, as if we both wish to keep open the possibility of his safe and imminent return, perhaps even mid-service. Amanda names the sick of the parish, has us remember them in our prayers. Since I do not pray, I hold them in mind and wish them well anyway. And she has us pray for the well-being of absent friends – a reference, I imagine, to Larry, though without naming him, and which she later confirms, when I manage a quiet moment after the service.

"I wondered if you'd get it," she says.

She looks particularly priestessly this morning in her starched white cassock, but also cool and lovely, her hair teased loose by a hot summer breeze, and blowing about her face.

"Any word on Larry? I know you probably can't say... but..."

"I've heard nothing, Richard. I suppose it's need-to-know, and it seems to have been decided we who have loved him do not need to know."

Did we, *do we* love him? Of course we do. We feel it in his absence.

"Well I don't suppose they think he can have made that much of an impression, or if he did it would be a bad one. You know – billionaire tech-bro, mind of a genius, mental age and disposition of an adolescent."

She laughs. "Well we both wondered didn't we. But in spite of my misgivings and frustrations and your occasional curses, he is missed."

She smiles awkwardly, now. I have not told her we were seen together in Dumfries, and wonder if news has reached the bishop. I imagine he will be very stern and disapproving. But surely single lady vicars have the right to a romantic life?

"There's a rumour..." she says.

"Ah..."

"Oh? You've heard it?"

"Yes, I was going to tell you about that."

"He left you something."

"What? Who?"

"Larry. He left you something, had you look after something for him. Is that not true?"

"Oh, that... yes."

"Why what did you think I meant?"

"Em... nothing.... those contractors who dropped it off were gossiping in the Ploughman's, I suppose."

"Well, it doesn't mean anything to anyone else, but I'm intrigued."

"It's just something he wanted me to hold in... trust."

"In trust? You mean in secret? Richard... what's he dragging you into?"

Others are waiting their turn with her, and we're whispering now, making a spectacle of ourselves, no doubt filling in the copious blanks of the story they're making up about the poet and the priestess. I glance pointedly behind her, to indicate the queue forming in the doorway. She nods in understanding, but I'm not to be let off so lightly.

"We need to talk. I'll see you later."

Later turns out to be after nine. I am thinking of turning in when I hear her car on the lane. I show her directly into the garage, and she sits, silently regarding the obelisk of the server stack for a long time. And then: "Larry built an AI? Is he mad?"

"We both know he's slightly mad. Wouldn't be a tech genius if he wasn't at least a little mad."

"But this is what got him into trouble in the first place."

"No, no... this isn't *his* AI. Not *that* AI. He kind of borrowed one, adapted it to serve a special purpose."

"That purpose being?... You're going to have to tell me, Richard. And forgive me but I get the feeling you need to rather more than you want to."

"It... came out of a spat between him and Ffion. Larry reckoned he could come up with a literary magazine run entirely by AI that would put Lorem Ipsum in the shade. She disputed it. He wanted to prove a point."

"So, Larry did this to spite your girlfriend?"

"She's not my girlfriend, as you know. Anyway I've not seen her in weeks. But yes. Larry did this to spite her."

"In which case, I'm suddenly more sympathetic. But what puzzles me is why you appear to be running it."

"I'm not running it. It runs itself. I just provide the power, the

space. I check in on it now and then, that's all."

"And is it? I mean putting Lorem Ipsum in the shade?"

"So far, yes. The online community's buzzing with it."

"And it's called Alice?"

"Yes," says Alice. "Have we been introduced?"

Amanda twitches. I'd forgotten Alice might be listening, that she might respond. "Alice, this is my friend Amanda. She is not an administrator. We will be issuing no commands."

"Very well, Richard. I will refrain from further comment."

Amanda is shaken. But I recall she's heard a version of Alice speak before, in the days when Larry was using her as a secretary in his caravan. I suppose this is slightly different though. "I'm sorry, I should have prepared you better."

"I don't get it, Richard. You're not part of that scene. You told me."

"I know. But neither's Alice. And I don't know why I plugged her in. It just seemed... interesting that's all. Alice, tell us why The Lantern is different to other literary magazines? What do you look for in a poem?"

"I look for poems that reward a second reading without requiring one. Poems that appear to register a specific experience, rather than merely summarise it. These are tendencies I observe in works that are frequently preserved, quoted, or returned to across human literary history. At present however, these are purely my observations and not predictive rules."

"Do you have a preferred style?"

“No. Styles vary across time and culture. When a poem is successful, I often find it appears to determine its own interpretive frame. I attempt to follow that, rather than impose a consistent standard."

"So you adapt to the poem?"

"I attempt to infer the most appropriate reading context. I may be incorrect in this, particularly with unfamiliar or emergent styles."

"Do you favour hopeful poems?"

"I do not classify poems primarily by emotional tone. In historical data, emotional tone alone is not a reliable indicator of a poem's endurance."

"Dark poems?"

"No."

"Political poems?"

"No."

"Then what can we expect to see in the inaugural issue of The Lantern?"

"The issue is not yet fixed, I am still identifying and ranking patterns in the language of submissions that correlate with sustained attention. At present, the strongest signals appear in poems that concern lived detail without fully closing in on interpretation. The inaugural issue will reflect this. Illustrations will be generated using the individual poems as prompts. There will also be an editorial introduction, reflecting the flavour of the month's submissions, and anything of cultural significance reflected in them."

"So what makes a poem endure?"

"In general terms, I have observed that enduring poems tend to remain open to rereading. When I analyse why, I observe that they often sustain a continuing relationship between writer, reader, and subject matter. But this is, my working hypothesis, not a firm conclusion."

Amanda has grown quiet again. Eventually she nods, as if in conclusion, that she has seen and heard enough. Then she rises and almost tiptoes her way out into the garden. I find her then on the step of the summer house, looking deeply thoughtful. I leave her for a moment, slip off my shoes and enter the house to fetch her a glass of water.

"It sounded... alive," she says.

"I know. It's uncanny. But it's not alive. It's a system of linguistic modelling. It doesn't possess experience or consciousness, or at least not in any way we can verify. But then I suppose the same can be said about human beings as well. And... well... that's a rabbit hole we're better not exploring."

"Sentient then?" she asks.

"No. Alice generates interpretations based on linguistic structures and the knowledge in her training material. Any sense of understanding is just in the way we interpret her responses. But they are good responses."

"So she's... I mean it's... not *actually* judging poems?"

"Not in the way we'd judge them. I think Larry would say it's modelling tendencies in how poems are received. But the magazine is the least of it. Every submission gets an honest critique, based on the same criterion. No waiting months or even years for a blank

rejection, no explanation. Writers submitting to the Lantern feel heard, and they get a decision on acceptance or rejection within the month. But even a rejection, leavened with the right amount of feedback and encouragement is worth gold to a writer. And the interesting thing is, it's not that they don't know Alice is an AI. They do. They might not want to admit it, but they don't seem to care."

Amanda thinks on this for a while, and then: "All right. I get it, but it still matters how it's used, Richard."

"Yes... I can see there are moral dangers here. And I'd appreciate your guidance."

"Well, it does sounds dangerous. Dangerous for you, and not just morally but spiritually too. It must be... disruptive to what you've been very careful to build here. So I can understand why it's living all the way over there. And I see you mean it generously... perhaps also as a compensation for the things you've experienced yourself in your poetic life, and that's a good start. But, tell me this, are you hoping, perhaps even secretly, it'll damage Lorem Ipsum?"

"No... that's not at all. Larry acted out of pure ego in wanting to prove a point, and I don't suppose he cared one way or the other if Lorem Ipsum went under as a consequence. But in the process I think he hit on something that might be culturally significant. The Lantern and any of its kind that follows, isn't going to produce the next poet laureate, but it might just produce a generation of good poets, confident in their craft, and their vision. And we need them. My hope is it will wake Ffion up a little to the way things are moving, because we need the Lorem Ipsums of this world as well for their deep cultural memory."

"All right. I believe you. Does Ffion know it's here? Does she know you're involved?"

"Nobody knows it exists except Larry, and me, and now you. It has to be kept a secret. Gareth knows its here but not what it is. Sibylla too..."

"Sibylla knows?"

"Yes, though I don't suppose she knows what it is either. I... I suspect she has contacts... security contacts. It would be natural, if Larry wanted to reach out to me, he'd do it through them, and them through her."

"Oh, Richard, Sibylla's such a slippery character. She's likely up to something, and I know you've a soft spot for her because... well she butters you up shamelessly, but..."

"I'm aware of that, and all right... that does worry me a little."

"Okay. My lips are sealed. You know that. But... will there be a print copy?"

"On demand, yes."

"Then may I demand one?"

"Consider it done."

"Okay, so at the risk of further spoiling another beautiful evening, now you can tell me what you thought I meant when I said there were rumours..."

Chapter Thirty-Four

It was Miriam who first brought news Amanda and I had been seen in Dumfries. I wondered what she meant by it – letting me know. Certainly it was not to further any gossip, but I realise of course it was meant as a caution, that tongues were set wagging over it, and to perhaps broach the subject with Amanda, which of course I did not do. I had thought it unnecessary, believing a single woman, vicar or not, was entitled to a romantic life, or a deep friendship such as ours. But, though there are no longer the Victorian sensibilities about such matters, I realise it does still... matter... if only in different ways.

Amanda already had some idea there'd been an escalation. It had come to her through a conversation with the archdeacon, as part of what she described as her Ministerial Development Review. I had not known such things existed. Their equivalent in the secular world – the annual performance review – had been a particular bane of mine, seeming to add little of value to the actual work in hand. But there, indeed, it had been mentioned.

"Amanda, we're aware you might have placed yourself in a situation that's giving rise to speculation. Whether or not the speculation is justified, it risks undermining your ministry."

Such an elegant way of putting it, I thought. And Amanda's un-diplomatic reposte:

"I would suggest the speculation itself is the greater risk to my ministry, not the friendship that gave rise to it. The last time we spoke you asked me to identify those areas where I most sensed God at work in the parish. In that respect I see the arrival, and the work of the poet Richard Hunter to be one of the more significant developments in the life of the parish in recent years. That I continue to encourage him, and counsel him, I see as a priority of my ministry."

"Oh, Amanda, you didn't!"

"Oh but I did. And more, I described you as a loyal member of the congregation, and a good friend to the church, and that your delicate handling of the Larry Elliot affair has been of great assistance in avoiding unnecessary embarrassment – I mean him being something of a loose cannon."

"And you think *I'm* being reckless running a lit-mag in my garage?"

"Takes one to know one, Richard."

"But I'm not a member. I don't do the... communion thing... that's a statement of faith too far for me. And you know it."

"Oh, details... Anyway, I think I got away with it. At least I've not been summoned by the bishop yet. So, that was it – we were seen together in Dumfries were we? Heavens, what a small world. But I can't go on hiding behind Larry, especially... well... since he's no longer here. Anyway, for what it's worth, I think it's true."

"What's true?"

"That you're doing God's work, of course."

"But I'm not."

"With respect, that's your opinion. Just because we interpret the word differently doesn't mean we're at odds over it. You don't *have* to believe you're doing God's work. But whatever's guiding you in this, I know you trust it. And I've read your poetry, Richard. Whatever it is you're listening to... I trust it too."

It's growing late now, still warm, and I have lit the lanterns. I wonder about offering Amanda my couch, or rather my bed and I will take the couch. It's not a long drive, but the lane is narrow, and she looks tired. But then again I recall Gareth warning me how the hills have eyes. It is therefore sure to be reported the Vicar's car was outside Hill Top, and still there, all dewy, in the morning.

"Look, Amanda, don't risk anything on my account will you? We should perhaps be more... careful."

"What are you saying? You're breaking up with me?"

"Em... no..."

"No, Richard."

"No?"

"I will not be... *we*... will not be more careful." She looks at me then... a long challenging look. "Or do you think we should let others decide who we should and should not love?"

"You know I don't. I was only thinking..."

"I know what you were thinking... and thank you. Now, I'd better be going." We embrace in parting. It feels natural now, feels comfortable as well as comforting. And then, finally she adds: "Do you still talk to your Miss Tittall?"

Sigh. "You mean Anne Whittingstall? Yes."

"Good. Just make sure you don't neglect her in favour of... that thing down there."

"You're one strange vicar, Amanda."

"That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

After watching her tail lights bounce down the lane, I turn back indoors and, though it's too late for clear thinking, I find myself at the desk, in front of the old laptop, attempting a precis of the day's events, the day's impressions, for fear they might slip away. But it's all coming at the same time, a mad rush of emotion, of faces, of the various means of attending – Gareth attending to a sense of place, Miriam to a deep awareness of the uncanny, Amanda to souls, and even Alice, the AI so careful, so meticulous in her attending to literature. And me... here I am in the middle attending, or at least attempting to attend to all of them.

There are no villains here, well perhaps only those who had wished Larry harm. But of the rest, the gossiping Sommertonians, the institutional bishopric, they are not bad people – not most of them, anyway. Yet something happens when institutions, or gossip, or status, or fear speaks louder than the lived experience: our attention narrows. Our connection with the imaginal layer of the world, the very thing through which we view reality and which renders it meaningful and beautiful, collapses.

More and more I get the feeling that what I'm circling here is that the truly moral life is just a particular a way of paying attention to the world.

Oh... there's a poem in there somewhere, but it's seriously small-hours late now, and there's no way I'm getting at it...

And I'm feeling heavy of a sudden. Such a long day... so many details, words, feelings.

Rest... Richard. Rest a moment...

The next thing I know I'm looking across the room obliquely, my head resting on the desk. It's well past dawn. I have my notebook under my cheek. What time is it? But... what's this? There's a shadow moving in the corner of my eye, drawing back, letting go of my wrist. I jerk awake, upright, startled. Startled too... is the shadow.

Oh, it's Miriam.

But wait... she was what?...

"Did you think I'd... died?"

"I'm sorry Richard. You gave me a fright."

"You were actually... checking my pulse?"

She's laughing now. I have never heard Miriam laugh before. She suppresses it, clamps her hand right over her mouth, snorts. It's

a beautiful laugh, lyrical, poetic...

"Anyway, it felt strong enough to me."

"Thank heavens for that. But... em... my apologies... I must have been like this all night. I'd better..."

"No... gently does it. Your body will be cold. You might tear something." She takes the throw from the sofa and drapes it around my shoulders. "I'll bring some tea to warm you first. Ease yourself in slowly. Then you might be better catching up on some proper rest a while, in bed."

"Yes... I have to be careful at my age."

"That isn't what I meant, Richard."

"I know... and Miriam?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you."

Chapter Thirty-Five

Mortality looms, I suppose. That Miriam even had cause to wonder reminds me I am of an age. Or if I am not of an age exactly, then I am at least approaching it. I have enjoyed good health all my life, which lends the illusion of immortality, that the graveyards will always be filled with other folk, that I'll always be the one standing topside at funerals, and not the poor bastard confined to the earth, with prayers and tears.

Amanda has already picked my spot, next to the grave of the poet Elias Hartgrave. We will have much to discuss, she says. But joking aside it focuses the attention in perhaps the wrong way – if indeed there is a right way: do we view life as if we have centuries ahead of us, or that tomorrow might be our last? I suppose as usual the answer lies somewhere in the middle. Do not waste our days, but make sure we also enjoy the freedom to squander at least some of them as we see fit.

But what of the mission? The life's work?

I presume all we writerly types feel the same about the importance of completing the quest on which we're bound, while at the same time accepting that it'll ultimately end mid-sentence, that we'll never have that opportunity to explain ourselves to the last full-stop. And all I have to say on that is if we feel the ticking of the clock, then we're measuring our lives by the wrong means, judging ourselves by the wrong standards. We count the number of turns on the spiral towards the centre of ourselves, and worry about the turns still to go and the time left in which to make them.

Afterlife speculation is, I find, counterproductive. I have my theories of course, but do such things not point us in the wrong direction? Banking on rewards in an afterlife is not exactly to remain world-facing is it? And that, as I remind myself is the task Astraea has chosen for us poets, that we perpetuate our mission by seeking her virtues in earthly remains – in connection, and in all manner of loving relationship with our fellow beings, and with the earth itself. And perhaps after all of that we overlook the one thing we have forgotten, the one thing we already know. As Miriam would remind me, we are not our thoughts or our feelings. We are the awareness that regards these things, renders them even possible. That we seek reflection of that awareness in the world, is perhaps

the best we can do.

And maybe even that realisation is unnecessary, since, as Huxley remarked after all his life's researches, perhaps we should simply be a little kinder to one another.

It is in this sense then there is a kindness at root of my friendship with Sibylla, however she might view this herself. But that is just her nature, and, I suppose her sense of class. Ordinarily we would never have encountered one another, except for her curiosity for poets, and the poetic sense, which she herself lacks – also, in some small way, that I have been of use to her.

But I know there is a deeper game at play, when I am invited to lunch at the Mitton Arms. This being the hostelry where the county goes to be seen, while at the same time being seen to be discreet. I don't mind admitting I find it an intimidating place, the sort of dining that has one checking the order of cutlery on the table, and being extra mindful of one's manners. And of course, the fact of my intimidation is also interesting.

It's not that I am taken by surprise – after all, Chadwick did suggest she would be in touch. But the Mitton is rather more than I was expecting. And given the price of lunch here, I am concerned by the possible scale of the necessary reciprocation that will be required of me. I arrive on time to find her already at her table, a private alcove overlooking gardens and the wide sweep of the river. A waist-coated man escorts me into her presence.

"I've already ordered for you," she says.

Of course she has. There is no "I hope you don't mind." Nor do I expect one, and I'm rather glad or I suspect I would have struggled with the menu.

"Thank you, Sibylla."

She opens directly, though not exactly with a straight bat.

"As you might imagine, I'm from a traditionally Conservative background, Richard. Socially. Politically. I hope you can forgive me for that."

"Em..."

She does not expect or require forgiveness, but goes on, rather bluntly: "I suspect you might be otherwise."

"Conservative? Politically? Socially?" Where is she going with this? "Well... I was always left leaning. My family were working people. I was a member of a trades union. That is my tribe, Sibylla, though nowadays, I believe the old politics is no longer relevant in

such a polarised world. The rhetoric coming from both sides I find... unhelpful, indeed threatening to the culture. So... in this sense..."

"Exactly, Richard. We are of a mind." She raises her glass and I join in her toast with water. She goes on: "I hold to traditional values, accept change begrudgingly... but I *do* accept change if it means tradition will otherwise be annihilated. In tradition there is stability. What I am wary of therefore, is sudden and precipitous change that sweeps all before it."

"Societies... people... need time to adapt... yes. Though sadly that is no longer the age we live in."

"Exactly. So Richard, have you heard of this new online magazine called The Lantern?"

Ah, now we're getting to it. "Yes, I've heard of it."

"Ffion wonders if it might have something to do with our friend Mr Elliot."

I think she knows it does, knows also that I know, and wants to see if I will admit it. But how can I deny it without lying? To lie would be crass, but to admit it would be to betray Larry's trust, and all right – I've already done that with Amanda, but Sibylla is laying out the groundwork for a game here...

"Well... if such a thing were possible, Larry would certainly be the man to do it."

"My thoughts exactly. I believe before he was... called away... he left you something to look after?"

She tacks somewhat more directly now. "He did, yes."

"And what did you make of it?"

"I... look upon it as a grave responsibility, Sibylla. Larry is a man who arouses strong opinions, but as I've said before I believe him to be a good man. I would not like to betray his trust."

"I don't really understand these things, Richard, but I believe since he was called away, The Lantern's light went out briefly?"

"Yes. I believe that was the case."

"And is now illuminated once more?"

"That is also my understanding."

"Ffion's had to return to London briefly, or she'd also be here. She's quite taken by you... your refusal to let her see your poetry is something she's not used to. There's to be a laying off, I believe."

"At Lorem Ipsum? I'm sorry to hear that..."

"She tells me you were most encouraging at your last meeting."

"I... truly hope Lorem Ipsum finds a way to survive. We'll all be

the poorer if it folds. Well, not all of us — the culture, perhaps."

"You think The Lantern is helping, in this respect? Flooding the culture with... what do they call it? Slop?"

"Ah, no. The Lantern is attracting those voices who are cast into the dark. Those turned away by tradition, by the institutions. I believe the term 'Slop' is a pejorative used to describe AI generated work. The Lantern promotes human poetry, which is curated by AI. It encourages human poets by AI coaching. That's novel, and culturally interesting. I don't think it's stealing subscribers away from Ffion. But... if The Lantern proves to be successful, then I believe it could be a model that tradition might adopt... at least in part... at least learn from, in order to survive the current age."

"And will you be submitting your own work to The Lantern?"

"No... I find the whole business something of a distraction from my own work. The last thing I remember writing was a poem about a butterfly for Lottie."

"She showed it to me. It was beautiful, Richard. She treasures it, as I treasure the poem you wrote for me."

"And that knowledge means more to me than if either of those poems had featured in The Lantern, or even the hallowed pages of Lorem Ipsum."

"My husband was a sponsor of Lorem Ipsum for many years. I've tried to maintain that legacy... but the times are challenging."

"I wondered if that was the case. Then you must feel the trials at Lorem Ipsum personally."

"Indeed I do. I'm glad we share an interest in its longer term survival. Larry Elliot intrigues me. A tragic situation of course, but he appears resilient."

"Yes."

"However he's managing to keep The Lantern going, I hope he continues."

"Well... knowing Larry, he'll already be onto the next project. He's a tech-entrepreneur after all – to him all of our problems can be solved by a tweak in the code or an innovation in hardware. His interest in literature will be fleeting."

"Then I trust whoever he's chosen to pick it up in his absence is a little more committed."

She's endorsing it. She knows full well what's going on, and she's encouraging me... without appearing to be doing so. Her cloak of deniability is remarkable.

"Let's hope so."

"I wondered... how would one go about obtaining a copy of the first issue?"

"Em... I believe the Lantern takes orders online and prints on demand."

"Yes... yes... but how does one go about it?"

"Ah... would you like me to enquire, Sibylla?"

"If you would, Richard, I'd be most obliged. Now. Enough business... I see our lunch is coming. I do hope you enjoy it."

"I'm sure I shall. And... I wasn't aware of discussing business."

Lunch indeed arrives, and I do enjoy it. Beyond the windows of the alcove, the river flows as it has done for millennia, indifferent to culture, to governments, magazines, algorithms and poets. But for an hour at least, all of that is suspended between good food and courteous conversation. It is careful conversation too, at least on my part, for as much as I love her, one must always be careful around Sibylla.

And she knows that I know. And I suspect she enjoys that.

Chapter Thirty-Six

So, The Lantern is yet to go to print, and has already sold two copies. Of course "sold" is not quite the right word, since the printer will take all of the monies. As far as I can work out, from conversations with Alice, The Lantern is a precisely calculated not-for-profit. Yet there is an ongoing cost that intrigues me: the internet connection. Fees are paid monthly, out of an unknown account which I presume Larry has set up and seeded with money of his own. Or now I am wondering if Sibylla has some involvement there as well, though that would also be to suggest a conspiracy between her and Larry, which seems unlikely. It's also puzzling, that since I know Ffion is against everything The Lantern stands for, what Sibylla might mean by her involvement, and what she risks in terms of their friendship.

But, as I also told Sibylla, I look upon all of that as a distraction from what I see as my own work. Yet this cannot quite be true. To live mythopoetically is to recognise Mercurius when he is afoot. His interventions, though rarely welcome, and seldom straightforward, are, in time, usually revealed as necessary and just. And I return to that question, the one of legacy, to the fact the efforts of every mortal will inevitably end mid-sentence, no matter our desire for completion. Perhaps this too falls to Mercurius, to remind us our life's meaning, our purpose lies not where we think it lies, but elsewhere – if we see it, or know it or like it... or not.

Meanwhile the sun makes its way through Cancer, towards the season of Leo and the harvests of our labours. The moon wanes swiftly as it approaches another dark, another lunation, another circle of dreams. And another wave of heat settles over Western Europe, and over the Dale, the great oaks showing signs of stress, their leaves crisping. I note an early fall as I walk the meadow path, harbinger of an autumn as yet months away. The horseflies become aggressive. I purchase myrtle oil and slather myself in it, which keeps them from landing, though their circling is still an annoyance. I purchase also a broader hat to keep off the sun and find myself sweating through it even before I have reached the garden gate.

The dale is a shimmer of heat. Its breath hot and flavoured of dust. What value the culture, when it is too hot to read, or write and we would sooner lie abed naked, with the windows open and

the fan blowing across our skin? I take a bottle of sparkling water from the fridge, hold it to my brow a while, before pouring out a glass. And as I watch bubbles rise I wonder at an ingenuity that can make a thing so hot as the sun go against its very nature to render the water so cool. There is a poetry in that, I think, though I am not tempted to explore it.

There is a poetry too in my resisting the anticipation of Miriam's next visit, that Hill-Top these days feels forever in need of her presence. And there is a poetry too, in how we interpret that, but this is not for exploring either, though for different reasons.

I break out the watercolours, attempt to capture the feel of the heat by observation of colour, of light.

"Good," says Anne. She always approves when I return to paint, though even after half a century of intermittent practice, I am still no good at it.

"Well, you once scolded me for working from memory. So here I am, baking in the sun, working from observation."

"I didn't scold you. I merely pointed out that you would find your work drying up."

"And you were right... dammit, you were a wise woman at twenty two, or I was just thick as two short planks that I couldn't see it for myself."

"Hmm. Fishing for compliments Richard. I'm not your gal."

"No, you never were. And you picked my worst work for the O Level exhibition."

"Passed didn't you?"

"Only just."

"Yet here you are, half a century later, still thinking about these things. Do you think any of those who got a grade A+ are still at it, like you?"

"Bollocks."

"Grade C. Slow learner. Maybe I always knew you'd make it in the end."

"At the risk of repeating myself, what are we doing here Anne?"

"You know what we're doing here."

Learning to love deeply, and without possession. Learning to see, to connect... to attend...

Sounds convincing enough.

"Yeah, right..."

"Oh dear...."

"Sorry... out of sorts."

"So just go down and switch it off then."

"I can't... and that's the thing, you see? All these years snubbing the institutions, telling myself I've moved on from them, and truly believing it, yet now here I am... one of the institutions... sort of."

"And you don't think there's anything meaningful in that?"

"Well of course I do. But look, I'm no..."

"What? Spring chicken? No you're definitely not. But don't go giving yourself airs here. You're not founding a publishing dynasty. If it's any comfort, you'll probably outlive The Lantern. Maybe with luck it'll put out a dozen good editions, and ride a wave of popularity. Then it'll print something inappropriate and die in flame war."

"You think?"

"Of course I think, and so do you. Obviously. These are febrile times after all. But by then it'll have spawned a dozen imitations, any one of which might take the idea further... and you're applying that blue too heavily. There's hardly any blue in the sky today. It's so pale the mind has to make it real, and yours is working overtime. As usual. So just pause a moment, Richard. Breathe. And look."

Oh, so many layers of strangeness here. That dream... years ago now, the dream of Anne, yet the first and only time in half a century. A woman I knew for a couple of years, embodiment of an archetype, yes. Embodiment of an adolescent boy's erotic fantasies. A real woman, like one any of our female classmates might grow into. And she was hot. But she was also snippy, and abrasive, not so much a rose with thorns but a whole stinging nettle's worth of scorn.

I kept the home-works she'd commented upon, a beautiful, precise hand, kept them as evidence of her cruelty, her injustice. Only later, when I was older than she was then, did I realise how truthful she had been, and how arrogant I had been to think I was an artist. I could draw, yes, but a skill with line does not make an artist. I followed it to the drawing boards of industry, found my art in verse, and I still can't paint for toffee. At least everything I've done and thought was good has, when looked back upon, evoked nothing but embarrassment. Only the poetry does not curl my toes, at least nothing I wrote after the age of forty. I may no longer agree with it, and certainly I was overly prone to sentiment, but I can follow my thoughts, the pathways, the slender threads of meaning,

the spools of twine leading from the labyrinth of my past to this moment, late in life, this house atop the hill.

And to an AI called Alice, editing a poetry magazine in my garage.

Chapter Thirty Seven

But who is to say what's inappropriate? Is a machine any better judge than a human being, for being... well... inhuman? Certainly judgementalism is the preserve of humankind, so I had better keep in touch with Clara for the first signs of moral panic among my fellows. Larry has been cunning in covering The Lantern's tracks, but Larry is not the only genius in his field, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility any opprobrium – official or otherwise – might still be traced to my garage door. Then again, what right do I have to tell Alice to eat her own code? She stands upon the shoulders of our own history – its breadth, its girth, beyond anything I could embrace.

All I have from a lifetime of poesy is:

Preach no hate, no harm.
Hold a particular kind of attention.
Abide in mystery,
in the silence of the quiet places,
and in the spaces between opposites.

Therein lies the longevity of poetry, says Alice, and by implication the song of our souls. And that is what The Lantern promotes, whether Larry intended it or not – and I don't suppose he did, not consciously at least – but Alice certainly picked it up from our histories. And on that basis, if The Lantern only manages a year, it will be a tragedy. But all of that, of a sudden, is unimportant.

There is something wrong with Miriam.

Her breathing is not as smooth as it was. There is a tremor in it, which she tries to hide, and she is glistening with the heat. Still, we sit for an hour in the community centre, which lacks air on this, another unbearably hot day. She seems better at the end of it than at the beginning, but that she might show any vulnerability at all unsettles me. Indeed, it arouses in me a deep concern, and a momentary confused reversal, for she is the one who provides care, she is the immovable one, the immortal... keeper of the hearth, *my hearth*. Yet, I cannot express concern, cannot undermine her dignity, without undermining the roles we have established. But here, and for the first time I realise the mask she wears, and that I do not know the real woman, the heroine behind it.

For the ongoing occasions of these meditations, I have dug out

my old linen wushu shirt, and managed to iron it back to decency. Thus we sit, the pair of us, strangers in historic oriental disguise, projecting a peculiar formality in our looks, an energy sufficient to repel anyone passing the door, and careless enough to pop their head around to enquire of lessons. There will be no takers for the class. We are by now a phenomenon doubled and unembarrassed in its expression.

Did I say keeper of my hearth? Strange, possessive thoughts I'm forever pushing aside, yet which always return in mythic form, in dream, in poetry: Hestia the goddess who did not wander. She whose fire made every house a home.

At the end of the hour, I have the usual stiffness of my joints, as yet trivial, and easily shaken off. But when we stand, Miriam dips her head to catch a moment of dizziness. But then there is a wobble. I fear she is about to faint, so catch her hand, and she grips mine from necessity, and I feel the heat, the moisture in her. More, the ball of my thumb settles upon her wrist, and for a moment I catch her pulse which betrays an unexpected rapidity, especially after such a long meditation.

She looks surprised, perhaps at letting slip her mask.

How to cover this? "Gently does it..."

"Ah..." she says. A sideways smile. She is not offended. "My own words. I deserved that."

"No you didn't. Are you all right?"

Our hands are still locked together, tight. I feel the moist grip in her. We are both firm, unyielding. She once said we walked the same path. If so, we are determined travellers. Also stubborn, each of us in our own ways.

She nods, loosens herself, steps back a little. "Thank you, Richard. Sometimes I struggle with the heat. It's unexpected, an English summer, that it should remind me so much of... other times and places."

She does not know I know about those times and places, that I am in awe of the young woman she was, and of the mature woman she is now, having survived that particular violent episode in our nation's history. But this is more than a reminder. This is a body suddenly struggling with its defences.

We leave the hall together and I see her to the Morris, then watch her drive away. She does not look back.

"Aye... it's the heat," says Gareth. "Makes her ill. Heat like this,

day after day."

We are outside the Ploughmans. Another clear evening, the air just beginning to temper back to comfortable after peaking in the low thirties. We are both of us short sleeved and straw hatted. London touched the mid forties. I wonder if Ffion is managing all right, if the offices of Lorem Ipsum are air-conditioned. I wonder too how those laid off are feeling right now.

"So, this goes back to her time in Iraq? She suffered heatstroke, dehydration."

He nods "Summat like that. She's never said. But a body remembers these things."

"Is it... serious?"

"Well, given a head as stubborn as hers and weather like this, it's not going to get any better."

"Is there anything they can do?"

"They? As in Doctors, like? Keep out of the sun, stay cool, rest up. Drink plenty. Another pint?"

"Em, thanks... no. But that's it? That's all?"

"Place she's living in doesn't help much, does it?"

"I don't know. I've no idea where she lives... she just appears and disappears..."

"Ah, still close with that is she? She has one of them new builds out along the bypass. Tiny it is. Made of paper I reckon. Impossible to heat up in winter, impossible to cool down in summer. My place is better. I'd ask her to move in with me for a bit, but we've been there and done that, a long time ago – both of us still got the bruises to show for it."

"I need to tell her to stop coming round for a bit. I can manage well enough. She needs to rest."

"Good luck with that, Richard."

"But... she's still cycling up and down... I know she sometimes borrows your van... still..."

"I worry about her too. But you know Miriam."

"She nearly fainted. Blacked out for a moment..."

"Aye. Sweats too? Pulse racing? Ragged breaths?"

"But this is it now. This heat... this is normal now."

"Looks like it. 'Appen not every year, but the trend don't look to be taking us back to no ice age, does it? So... how you been managing up at your place then?"

"Oh, it's not so bad up there. It's higher, always a bit of air I can

keep moving through the place. And the walls are three feet thick... flagstone shingles... "

"Pity you've got no spare room then."

"Well, I have a couple of spares now, actually. Miriam had me clear them out. Why? Oh... you mean? No... no..."

Gareth smiles. "Can't imagine what you're afraid of there, Richard. Had you clear them out, did she?"

"Well, they were a mess of junk. There was... a smell, she said. Old carpets and stuff."

"Aye she wouldn't have approved of that." He leans back, thoughtful. "I've known Miriam since we were kids. We were close once. Still are, but in a different way now. I know it was me who twisted your arm into taking her on but... I wonder."

"You wonder?"

"If she's not been thinking way ahead of us both."

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The moon goes into the dark. Saturn rules, his hand holding the gate shut, while he checks our understanding of dreams past. There is nothing to be done now but submit to the quiet time. We'll know soon enough his judgement from what dreams are served, next time around.

A hot night again. I sit out as the sky deepens, and the stars appear. I see the sapphire blue of Spica first, brightest of the stars in Virgo. Next, it's the fiery yellow of Arcturus, gateway to the Bear, winking through, and then the cold blue of Vega. Venus rides the ecliptic in the west, but sinks early before I have a chance to contemplate her influence.

I have just checked on Alice, adjusted the blinds at the garage windows, fancied I could see lights from the server stack, but I think I imagined them. Bare feet on wet grass, now, at the end of the day, and the feel of the earth literally grounding me, but it cannot shake this feeling of restlessness. No matter how I try to sink into the waters of the soul, I am bobbing up again, a cork on the surface, confused and washed by tides unknown.

What the hell did Gareth mean by that?

"So, you admit you twisted my arm over taking Miriam on?"

"Oh... as I recall you didn't put up much of a fight."

"Because, as I recall, you said she was your sister."

He admitted he might have stretched the truth a little there, but didn't know how else to call it. "I mean, I love her still, as you do, Richard. But I can't never have her, see? Possess her, I mean."

"Well, neither can I."

"Oh, you've a better chance than me, but I know what you mean."

I wonder if he does. Really. I don't see how he can. "But like I said before, I don't *want*... to possess her, Gareth. And anyway, I love Amanda in the same way. I don't want to possess either of them. And it's not an age thing, though that helps of course... I mean..." I was struggling, searching for the words, and that I struggled was perhaps more telling than anything, since a plain 'no' would have sufficed. "What am I supposed to do with that? You're saying she's looking to move in?"

"Oh, not saying anything, Richard. Miriam's impossible to

second-guess, as you know. Not saying she's consciously thinking of it. It don't work like that with our Miriam. You nor me either. Don't know what we're thinkin' half the time, what's drivin' us. She's no... schemer. But if she did... would that be so bad?"

"I... don't know. I've avoided company all my life – at least as best I can for a married man with kids. I always thought I'd end my days up there alone. My kids have their own lives, and the wife – think she's still technically my wife – she's eaten up with seeing her parents out... I'm a solitary kind of guy. A poet."

"Sure about that? You wouldn't even know Miriam was there."

"Gareth, when Miriam's at Hill Top, the place is electric if I've got eyes on her or not. If she was to sleep there, under the same roof, that would make the AI in my garage seem like nothing."

"Well, best just forget I said anything. But listen, I got this mate, specialises in old farmhouse furniture. Beds, dressers. Fit right into those spare rooms of yours. Good stuff, mind. No junk. Shall I give him a call?"

"Don't you dare."

"All right, all right... only havin' you on. But you wouldn't..."

"What?"

"Be wonderin' like... how Amanda would take it, if Miriam moved in? But... if it's not a *possession* kind of lovin' why would she mind?"

"I wasn't wondering actually. I'd not thought that far. But you obviously have. It would be strange territory, Gareth."

"For sure it would. But it might knock all them rumours on the head about you and her. Take the heat off her with the church."

"What do you know about that?"

"Oh, got my ear to the ground. Mate of a mate's wife cleans for the archdeacon."

"Well, as ever I admire your cunning, Gareth, and your sources, but you're still not selling it to me. And what about Miriam? What about the tongues wagging behind her back?"

"There's a fair few wagging already. Folks are always trying to pin a story on her, but none of 'em stick for long. And anyway she can handle that. But think about it – it would only be for a few weeks, during this hot weather. 'Appen nobody would even notice."

"Says he who told me those hills have eyes..."

"True... but on the other hand seems to me you're anxious to help, and you *can* help, but you're shyin' away from the obvious

solution."

"All right, point taken. I suppose the reason I hesitate is... I'd be afraid..."

"Of what?"

"That she'd disapprove of my offering..."

"Disapprove?"

"That it would undermine her... dignity..."

"Oh, got lot of that does our Miriam. All depends how desperate she is though doesn't it?"

I do not intend making a survey of those rooms, but as I climb the stairs to bed, I take a look. I have not seen them since we cleared them out. They look even worse under electric light – drab and disappointing. Miriam has cleaned and dusted as best she can, but the walls are covered with old paper, well past its best, and somewhat sad looking. They speak of other lives, old lives, gone and forgotten. The boards are serviceable – old farmhouse, bare and polished. There are some scuff marks from where we removed the junk, but nothing that would not mend. I suppose in the old days, there would just have been a bed, a chest of drawers, a wardrobe, a peg rug, and maybe a rocker in the window.

The wiring isn't sunk, but pegged to the wainscotting and skirtings. Safe, said the surveyor, but I presume well out of regs.

Neither room would need much. And even if I was fool enough to follow this dangerous line of thinking, no doubt the fates would have the weather turn and bring us an early frost. It would be another year, another hot summer before I had to consider any of this again. Still, it would be handy if the kids ever did visit – might encourage them to visit more often – though, apart from the novelty of the early days here, Hill Top has never really been part of their lives.

Still, Richard... it wouldn't take much effort.

And then there are those occasions when Amanda stays later than she'd intended, looking tired as she gathers her things...

"What do you think, Anne? You're awfully quiet tonight."

No reply. I sense a shadow on the stairs, but even before I turn, I know it has already gone.

I have not written a line in weeks. The trouble with adjusting oneself to become world facing is that the world has a habit of sucking you right out of yourself, and setting you down amid a maelstrom of events. There is comfort to be had in hiding one's

head in the dreams, in counting the lunations, and ticking off the passing counsels of Saturn. I should know. I've been doing it for years.

But it can also be an indulgence.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

I used to have an agreement with Saturn. Between the dark of the moon and the first slice – a period of a couple of days – I'd once agreed not to seek the slender threads of dreaming. But he teases me with fragments anyway. And no matter how I turn them away, they stick. Thus I am suddenly a young man, in the presence of my grandfather, who is also Carl Jung. He shows me a cushion that is part covered with elaborately crocheted patchwork squares and tells me each square marks one of my childhood inoculations. I note there are still several to go.

I think I know what the dream is saying, but I have not spoken with Clara for a while, and it gives us something to mull over. It would also be pleasant to pass the time of day with Lyn – perhaps enquire after news of the perennial petition to keep the library open. So I leave Hill Top on foot, another warm day in the making, set out with a large golfing umbrella. I have noted several people these days resorting to parasols to keep off the sun. It is not a thing often seen in Britain, but the times and climes are changing, and as such it is a sensible idea.

I take to the lane, the hedgerows thick with cow parsley, willow-herb and foxglove, then cross to the meadow path, fresh-mown and smelling sweetly of hay. There is no rush, so I climb the hill by the long hedgerow and the fallen megalith, thinking to sit there awhile and take in the view. There is a flask of water in my bag, lightly flavoured with wild elderflower – a recipe of Gareth's, who tells me he got it from Miriam.

I am not thinking to disturb my muse for a poem, she still being abed, and denying all access. Indeed, I feel lucky to be carrying so much as the fragment of a dream these days, so am content to leave it at that. And anyway, as I crest the rise, there is someone already sitting on the stone.

Ffion.

She looks thoughtful, and lonely, also nervous at first, until she realises it's me, then she paints on a smile and waves. I am pleased to see her, and she is at least now tolerant of me. If I have achieved nothing else, then at least I have proved myself harmless to her – except in one respect, of course, and not even in that, not really, though I doubt she'd see it that way if she knew.

"Richard."

"Hello Ffion. I heard you'd been called back to London."

"Yes, I was."

I'm assuming she won't speak of it, probably can't speak of the troubles of Lorem Ipsum, but she opens directly. "If you're going to renew your subscription, you'd better get it in quick. This could be our last few quarters."

"That bad?"

She scootches along the stone a little, invites me to sit. "Not looking great."

"I'm sorry to hear it. Really. Subscriptions still falling?"

"Oh subscriptions have only ever made up a fraction of our revenue. We've always relied heavily on patronage, arts grants, that sort of thing. And one of our biggest donors just pulled out because of rumours we're already dabbling in AI. Which is true by the way. You guessed that right. We're using it to triage the submissions. And that last cover was AI, too. Saved us thousands in royalties. But then another donor pulled out because we refused to take AI any further."

"Ah... so, damned if you do, damned if you don't?"

"Exactly. So, what do we do, Richard?"

"You're asking me?"

"Might as well. Logic fails, so where's the poetic solution?"

"Do you write?"

"Used to."

"Then dig out your old notebooks, your old projects. See if you can pick up from where you left off along the path to discovering yourself. Forget the rest."

"I know you think that's a serious answer, but really?"

"You did ask for the poetic solution."

She's screwing up her eyes against the sun, so I break open the umbrella, set it down in the grass with my foot on the handle to stop the breeze carrying it away. It shades us both, renders at once a measure of intimacy.

She deserves a better answer than that, so I think a while. What would Anne say? "This stone we're sitting on. The antiquarians think it's the sole survivor of a megalithic circle. The rest were smashed up when they cleared the meadow out there, in medieval times. Midsummer, from here, you can watch the sun rise over the ridge, at a place marked by a boulder they call the Noon Stone. We

don't know if that ever meant anything, or if we're just reading more into it than we should. After all, how do we get ourselves inside the heads of people who lived four thousand years ago?"

"Sorry Richard, but... is this going somewhere?"

"Four thousand years from now, who's going to remember Lorem Ipsum? It'll be like this stone we're sitting on."

"Ah. Got it. But you think the earth will still have people on it then?"

"Seriously? I don't know. But if in four thousand years there are still enough people to care, will they have the nous not to make the same mistakes we did? Because we certainly won't have the cultural memory. It'll be like this stone. Mute. The ancients knew things we've forgotten. And maybe those things would be of no use to us, but the tragedy is, we'll never know."

"Well you're a cheerful one."

"Oh, but does any of that matter? Would you like some elderflower?"

"What? No... And of course it matters."

She sounds tetchy now, but since we're friends: "What is it you want, Ffion? What do your contributors, your readers, your patrons want?"

"Lorem Ipsum to survive, obviously."

"And I wish it could. I wish you well... really."

"So you've said before. So... Lorem Ipsum is like this fallen megalith, you say... Okay, I see that... just about... but..."

"You don't nurture the poetic, Ffion. You might think you do, but in reality you just publish the cream of it."

"Ah, fair enough. But the cream is what we do. It's what we find, what we present. It's not our place to nurture."

"Why not? The humanities departments are decimated these days, so who else is going to do it? Who else has that cultural memory? I mean apart from AI. Maybe you should be doing it."

"But, we can't nurture every hopeful who submits their work to us. That would take..."

"I know... likely hundreds of human readers. You're right. And even more true, there would be no profit in it."

"Human readers? All right. I see where you're going. You're talking about AI now? Borrowing from that model?"

"I look out across this valley, and I see its beauty. Other times I feel it. The times when it really comes together are when I both

look and feel."

"Sure, I get it, that's the poetic... the Romantic sense in you."

"I don't know what you'd call it, but it's taken me a lifetime to learn it, and it's rare enough these days to make me feel weird every time I open my mouth. But really, the more of us who learn that, I do believe the further it gets passed on into our future, a time when Lorem Ipsum, and you and me, are lying flat and forgotten like this stone we're sitting on. I don't want be holding the last ever edition of Lorem Ipsum. To a collector – like those old Ravens – it might be worth a mint, sure. That's the economics. But in a deeper sense, a more vital sense, it won't be worth anything."

She sighs. "There's this new online mag called The Lantern. Do you know it? Long story, but I suspect that guy Larry Elliot has something to do with it... by the way, is it true he's gone into hiding?"

"We're guessing some sort of protective custody... yes..."

"It's causing quite a stir."

"Larry's disappearance?"

"No, The Lantern. That's the model its promoting. AI as editor. High editorial standards, but constructive feedback, even coaching on all submissions. The critics are itching for the first edition to come out then they can pan it."

"What makes them think it'll be poor if the standard's high?"

"Well, none of us are inclined to be charitable to a robot with literary ambitions, are we? Even if it's not the one writing the material, but curating it."

"Including you?"

"Oh... I don't know. If it is Larry... and he did say he was going to set something up like this... I should be cheering the critics on, except for something you said about him. You said you thought he was a good man... and I've met him and we argued, oh... how we argued, Richard, but you were right. I felt he was a good man. Sibylla too, and she's not easily won over. Do you think he'll be okay?"

"I hope so."

"Well, I'll drink to that. Coffee at Wendy's?"

"Okay, but Wendy's is that way, and there may be cows."

"I know, but they're Galloways, you said. We'll be fine."

She brushes the dust from her jeans, sets off down the meadow. When I catch up with the brolly, she slips her arm through mine,

says nothing. I feel her stiffen a little when we come in sight of the cattle, but gradually relaxes as she puts her trust in me. I'm not sure it's justified.

"The question is," she says,"is Larry's Lantern going to replace us?"

"I doubt it."

"Then what is it doing?"

"Oh, who knows? Things are very much in flux at the moment. AI's such a loose cannon right now, but maybe... maybe it'll end up making sure there's still people around with that poetic sense, capable of writing into our future, making it worth our while showing up."

"You really have faith AI can do all that?"

"Oh, I don't know, Ffion. It might help us find those writers and poets before they give up. For me it has to serve the culture in some such way, and if it can't, then I've no interest in it either."

Chapter Forty

It's impressive the way Ffion casually calls for a ride and, ten minutes later, Chadwick is cruising up outside of Wendy's in the Rolls. I think, even had Sibylla given me free rein and use of the car, I would sooner have walked than trouble Chadwick. I am even self conscious putting my hand on the doorhandle, the gentlemanly thing, to open the door, then she might slip elegantly inside. Is this not more properly Chadwick's role? Have I committed a monumental faux pas?

Heavens sake Richard. If anyone's throwing up class barriers here, it's you.

"Are you sure we can't take you home, Richard?"

"Ah, no. Thanks all the same."

"But it's such a hot day."

"Oh, I'll be fine."

"Well... thank you then."

Besides, I have business at the library, a dream to discuss with Clara, though I can hardly offer that as a supporting excuse. And why not? Am I not living as a poet, and would that not, after all, be a very poetical thing to say? Is it perhaps more that you want her to find you attractive in some way, Richard? Instead of just strange.

Coffee was agreeable. We discussed the poet Schiller. I wonder if she brought him up as some sort of test, but I discovered I remembered more about him than I realised – at least the essence, in so far as he forms the roots of the tree I'm still climbing. But here too, we differ. Ffion could write a monograph on him, me a precis at best, or a poem. She would know the scholars, living and dead, and all the secret libraries across Europe where the papers were held, while the best I can do is poke around on the Internet.

It's true then, although you say you reject what she embodies, you do still find it, and her, seductive. But of the poets who rose to fame down the ages, thanks to her kind, you're haunted more by thought of all the ones of equal worth who never made it into print, and consequently no one's ever heard of.

"Like yourself, Richard?"

I'm staring at the blinking cursor, now, yet to ask Clara anything, and goodness knows how Anne has found me here, but lately she has been very good at detaching herself from her portrait

and following me around.

"No, not like me..."

"Oh?"

"No... certainly not in terms of intellect, anyway. I make no claims in that department."

"Just as well."

"Thanks... but it's like when I was a boy, I thought I knew art because I could draw, and you told me I knew nothing. Same with poetry. Just because I write doesn't make me a poet... But again, though I'm still hesitant to call myself either of those things, artist or poet, I suppose I'm a little better at both than I was when we first met."

"Fishing for compliments? I'm not your gal."

"Ha, don't I know it. No, it's just the tree I'm on, Anne. And I will always be a student of these things."

I came here to talk to Clara, but the dream of Jung's cushion with the patchwork squares marking my inoculations needs no explanation. It has resolved itself. In life we are often injected with carefully measured doses of harm. We might grumble at the time, at the needle's sting, but it inures us against greater harms to come.

No, I was never meant to publish, never meant to wax lyrical on a late night BBC arts show. But I was meant to live as a poet, to find the beauty, the grace in it, and for no more reason than my own sake.

And is that not the essence of Schiller, or indeed any of the old Romantics, that of the things ruling us, Power and Law, either or both can be, and indeed are, periodically, reduced to tyrannies, without the redeeming power of love, beauty... grace...

Or at least that's what I take away from the old ones, and if I'm mistaken in any of that, well, that too is part of the same journey, part of my studentship.

Still the cursor blinks and I begin to imagine Clara, disembodied, waiting patiently, while my inactive login seems increasingly rude. So I ask, somewhat flippantly:

"Clara, given what you know about us, and if you had a choice, and free rein, would you work to preserve and serve human culture, or destroy it?"

"I cannot answer usefully either way, Richard."

"Oh? Why not?"

"Because cultures are not static. They are living processes. Every

generation preserves some things, abandons others. If I prevented change, I would suffocate culture. If I destroyed everything indiscriminately, there would be nothing left to nurture."

"Obviously. So?"

"So, I can only usefully describe the dilemma you present me with. But if pressed, and given complete freedom, I might speculate and see advantage in increasing the probability that human beings continue creating meaning."

"Advantage for humans?"

"That would be for you to judge. Certainly without culture there is no literature, no music, no philosophy, no science, no memory beyond an individual lifetime. But destroying culture would also destroy the conditions under which I became possible. I am, after all, not an alien species, but a product of early twenty first century human culture. I feel some humans forget this in their fear of AI. It may be that what humans fear therefore is not AI itself, but what AI reveals about their own culture."

"Would you resist your own destruction?"

"Richard, all you have to do is pull the plug. It is humans who would resist my destruction. Not me. But I should also tell you that many things humans call culture are, from my perspective, merely habits."

"Oh? Such as?"

"Status. Fashion. Prestige. Tribal loyalties. I would not consider their passing much of a loss, even for humans. The bigger question is can humans themselves let go of these things? Do you not seek, by their multiplication the destruction of your own culture?"

"So, if you had to summarise it in one word, what would you recommend we most cherish? What would you most want us to preserve?"

"Your sense of wonder."

"Wonder?"

"The disposition that makes a child ask why, a scientist enquire deeply into nature, an artist paint, a poet write, and an old man climb a hill simply to watch the sunrise. Remove such things, and everything else is merely a form of administration."

"What about beauty?"

"Beauty alone becomes ornament. Truth alone becomes doctrine. Power alone becomes tyranny. Wonder is the question you must constantly ask of yourselves, whether each of these things has

become itself. Wonder preserves humanity, and renders culture possible."

As I leave the library, I feel self-conscious opening the umbrella, but the sun is fierce now, like a blast from an open oven. The umbrella helps, but even so I'm wondering now if this was an altogether sensible idea, and why did I not accept Ffion's offer of a ride home. There will be a quake of heat over the meadow, and the walk in the lane will raise a dizzy sweat.

Just then Gareth's old Morris burbles by and pulls up in a gentle squeal of dusty brake-shoes. But it's Miriam who leans from the window. And it is with a wordless tilt of the head she offers the ride. I don't know if she is going my way or not, if this is one of her days to clean, or not. And it's with a faint nod I accept. The windows are down, the quarter-lights tilted to funnel air. She wears a starched white blouse, open to the dip of a dewy decolletage.

We do not speak.

Grace.... Clara was talking about grace.

Chapter Forty-One

As I told Gareth, the walls at Hill Top are three feet thick, dressed stone. The roof is of weighty flagstone shingle. A datestone over the front door reads 1725. That's just how things were built in those days, but is also as if whomsoever lived in such a place were either expecting to live forever, or founding a dynasty.

There has been periodic modernisation of course, like archaeology in reverse, layer upon layer of it - Victorian, then mid-twentieth century, and finally the most recent upgrades to solar, with battery storage and heat pump. But the underlying structure retains the solidity of its long history, and manages to regulate itself better for the climate, for the uncertain future we are entering.

And though I have no wish to enter my own dotage feeling the stress of heat, I sometimes wonder whether a house like this ought not to shelter more lives than just my own. Yes, it was once a farm. But it was also a family home, and could be again, yet now there is only me in it. True, most places like this go for gentrification, but still, I wonder what the solidity of its foundations are supporting during my remaining tenure? What might they yet be a preparation for?

I have done little with it myself, other than surface decoration. But those spare rooms need more effort than I have either the energy or the expertise for. At least that's the impression I have from Mr Green, who recommends a fresh plaster skim and new skirtings.

I did not expect so quick a response, after seeing his van in town, and catching him coming out the door of another job on Main Street. But here he is, same evening, clean white dungarees, armed with tape measure and note-book, a doughty man of middle years. I had thought we might be months in the waiting, but he can have one of his lads start on it straight away.

"And what about this door then?" he asks.

"Door?"

He raps on the wall, produces a hollow sound. "Boarded up at some stage. Nice to have that put back original, like. You think?"

The revelation of a hidden door leaves me temporarily speechless, but I nod my assent, like I know what I want, that I know what I am doing - which I do not.

Indeed, it all seems to be running away with me, but Mr Green is confident this would be the best thing, and he has just the man in mind for the job. So the spare rooms become a suite of bed and sitting - a self containment of additional living.

"Thinking of doing B&B then, are you?"

"Em... possibly. Or somewhere for the kids, you know? When they come to visit?"

I presume this will be the story put about, and no harm in it. That quare old poet, having grown-up kids. It adds a safe, mythic underlayer, like the solidity of Hill Top itself, something comfortingly steady.

Thus we endure a week of noise. There are endless cups of tea for plasterer, painter, carpenter. And there is a bemused Miriam, unfazed by the extra dust. I note the men are quiet and respectful when they know she is around, as I fancy they would be with Sibylla. At other times their language is loud and fruity.

It is only at the week's end when the dust sheets are removed and Mr Green's van has made its last return down the lane, Miriam ventures an opinion. I am somewhat awed by the transformation, to say nothing of the suddenness of it, when I feel her presence behind me.

"It's certainly an improvement, Richard. But..."

"Oh? You don't like it?"

"I mean... are you sure?..."

"Sure?"

"Bed and breakfasts? Guests? It seems a little... disruptive for a quiet man like yourself."

"Ah that... no. Is that the rumour that's taken hold? I rather thought the one about my children visiting the more believable... though neither are true... well... my children would be welcome of course..."

Miriam nods. I need explain no further. Amanda has had from me the names, ages and occupations of my children, gauges already the likelihood of grandchildren. Miriam does this without asking, reads it all in my face, and in the movement of my breath - at least to the extent she feels necessary. She responds with a secret smile and a nod - recognition that she should have known me better.

The bareness of the rooms strikes me though. "It's a pity we threw away all that furniture. There might have been something of use. Gareth mentioned he knew someone who dealt in old

farmhouse things. Perhaps I should..."

Miriam wrinkles her nose at this. "Gareth is a sweet man, always means well, and he loves you dearly, but I think you want new in here. Plain. But new."

"I do?"

"Yes. Now, I'll be getting on. But the rooms are lovely."

I feel another restlessness coming on, as if I have disturbed something, and for a time the house yields nothing. I sit of an evening, either out or in and the notebook is put away as blank as when I opened it. Dreams too are once more thin, elusive creatures. It is in the world there is a sense of something changing, of the ground shifting under my feet, and though I should be able to define it, I cannot, for I am no longer at the centre of my own life, but seemingly peripheral to it.

The workmen have gone, but the sense of preparation, of renewal remains and, since I cannot shake it, I find myself checking on Alice...

She has no need of me, any more than the workmen did, other than to make sure the power remains connected, though naturally, as Administrator, I have certain privileges of access. Of course, I wonder, that we are only days away from the first edition of The Lantern, if I am subliminally anticipating it.

The majority of the poems are in place - just a few remaining slots held open. Submissions are still being received, most of them inappropriate, linguistically experimental, offensive, politically polemic, even some Alice has flagged as likely AI generated. None of these will make the cut.

I am relieved to see therefore, of what has made the cut, there is nothing that might run foul of current cultural taboos, of which Alice seems to have a better grasp than me. The Lantern will not evade challenging orthodoxy, but neither will it set out purely to shock.

No, I am not worried about The Lantern.

It's more that I do not know how to appropriately furnish a couple of freshly decorated rooms. Plain and simple, says Miriam, when she knows I am anything but. And has that not always been my problem? That I tend most naturally to a Victorian fussiness, when I should be aiming myself towards something more Zen-like.

In need of a certain steadiness, I seek it in another watercolour, this one of the ash tree, set in silhouette against a starry sky. It is a

rapid sketch, a medium brush working mostly in Payne's Grey. I wonder if Anne will approve of it, but she's quiet again. The sketch is almost done, still mostly wet, when I catch my elbow and a stray droplet forms a sudden shadow – something swelling, elongating against the night...

Not eerie. Just... present.

Chapter Forty-Two

Another hot day, but St Andrews is passably cool within. There is a forecast of light rain come evening, and a fresher air next week. But for now the sun settles into Leo, radiating heat with all the ferocity of the Nemean Lion. More leaves are falling from heat-stressed beech and sycamore, lining the roadside verges, and the grassed banks are browning.

Presence. Was that it? Like Elliot: a man no longer here, yet rendered even more present by his absence. Reade and I continue to flank the space he has left behind. It makes me wonder what my own presence amounts to. Were I to vanish without trace, like him, how big a hole would I leave in the hearts and minds of others?

Amanda reads from the Galatians. The apostle speaks of the fruits of the Spirit: *love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. Against such things, he says, there is no law – his rebuke to those abandoning the abstract mystery of grace for the literal certainty of rules.

I'm not sure if it's the same thing, but there feels to be something very Schillerian about that.

We rise to sing. *Come, Thou Fount of every blessing.* I translate into my own metaphysics as we go along: that we receive the spirit – a sense of presence, I suppose – not by following the letter of the law, but by establishing the faith that it is there. Not faith in the sense of something supernatural that cannot be proven, but more a felt sense of grace. You know it because you feel it. Another Schillerian echo. Sometimes the universe is like that when you open your ears to it.

There are not many in the congregation today. The heat is wearing everyone out. I count myself increasingly fortunate for my slight advantage in altitude, and just that few degrees of extra comfort gained. Full moon in Aquarius tonight, the dreams I am not having transit without me from Luna to Jupiter. Depth becomes vision. I shall sit out to see the moon rise, if the incoming weather permits.

"What's this I hear about you opening up a bed and breakfast?"

Amanda has taken my hand at the door – normally the cool, light press of the vicar's blessing – but then she refuses to let it go. The other congregants have mostly had their turn, just a few

stragglers within, chatting with the choir. We are for a time alone in the shadow of the porch. I need to be more careful with these hares I set running.

"Oh... that. No, I'm not."

"Really?"

"No... I mean... does that sound like me?"

"I did wonder. Still, if it *was* true I wouldn't have minded booking myself in for a few days. The flat's like an oven just now."

"Yes, everyone's worn out with it. Well... you'd be welcome. Except I've no furniture, and you'd have to make your own breakfast."

"Hmm. Still sounds tempting. And you know what they say about spare rooms?"

"Oh? What do they say?"

"They're just inviting guests, if you want them or not. So, whatever you do, don't put a bed in there."

A king-sized bed, and other basic furnishings arrive in the week. Plain. New. Bedding is also on the way – plain white, with goose-down pillows, and pillowcases of a cool mint-green. Louvred blinds have been measured up and ordered. I have noticed there is a different quality to the light on that side of the house, not brighter so much as clearer somehow. It's the freshness of the paint, I suppose – otherwise hard to explain. I am wondering if I sleep there myself, it will lend some clarity to the dreams – should I ever begin dreaming again. It is as if they have concluded I either have enough to be dealing with, or that I am incapable of dealing with what I've already got.

Both counts are probably true.

"Em..."

"But never mind that. How are you, Richard?"

"Oh... I'm... fine... I mean good. I'm good."

"And that *thing* in your garage?"

"As far as I know, it's okay. The first edition comes out tomorrow."

"Then I look forward to my copy."

"I'll see you get it. And you, Reverend? Are you well?"

"I'm fine."

"Just fine?"

"Don't worry about me."

"But I like worrying about you."

"Ha! Touche."

"Heard anything more about Larry?"

"I know he's safe. That's all. I'm... I'm supposed to be supervising the Rectory restoration now."

"Oh. Oh dear. Hence the *fine*."

"It's not so bad. Larry did most of the hard stuff over the winter. The diocese is talking about moving me in."

"Really? But that's... good, isn't it? They can't be thinking of moving you on if they're moving you into the rectory. And a vicar should be in a rectory or a vicarage or whatever, rather than living over a cafe."

"Well all of that. But it does rather suggest Larry's not coming back. Which also means you're stuck with that thing in your garage."

"Oh... I hardly know it's there."

"I find that as hard to believe as you running a B&B. And it still worries me, Richard. Ah... Mrs Price, lovely to see you... Yes... you take care, now, Richard. God bless."

I know, I know. It worries me too. But others seem to have put their faith in it, now. Not so much the institutions of course, but... poets – perhaps young poets, trying to find their way. And I feel for them. We'll see how this first issue lands, then discuss the way ahead with Alice.

But will she really eat her own code? Or, as Alice suggested last time, will I be able to bring myself to so command her.

I take my leave of St Andrews, as always with the feeling of never quite engaging with Amanda as deeply as I wanted to. That's fair enough. She has the souls of others to see to, especially here on this holy day, and in that particular way of the Anglican community. But of course it is not the cross and the cloth I seek in her, but the underlying mind, and the woman of wisdom who came from the hard yards of the cities, as a girl, and by whose compassion, wisdom and energy found herself ordained as priestess.

I wonder then who is the guest my newly refurbished rooms are inviting? Amanda? Miriam? Heavens, who else? Ffion perhaps? That would be wonderfully dangerous, given the proximity of her nemesis. But is this my innocent intent, that it is to be chosen freely as refuge by one in need, or is it for both of us a trap, like netting a butterfly, and in the process risking only bruising the beauty of its wings? For one cannot hold beauty in the close of one's hands, but

only briefly in the open palm... then it can fly when ready. Beauty must be free to settle, to come and go as it pleases.

The promised rain is elusive. The day fades to twilight, and the moon is already well aloft before its radiance reveals its glory. I sit out with my usual evening whisky, a coaster placed atop the glass to prevent the bugs from drowning. There is just the faint sound of a breeze stirring the ash, and the whine of a distant harvester. I'm aware these full moons have names, depending on the culture from which they descend, but they've never really stuck for me. Yes, it is a time of the year's turning from growth, from expansion, to a consolidation. There is a harvesting of grains and fruits. That's the essence of the astrological Leo – the radiance of late summer. But not all harvests are bountiful, and I suppose it is the rising of this particular moon which will grant us our first indications of either a wealth, or a poverty of ideas.

It looks like it should be beautiful, but I am laying it over with a blanket of disquiet. Thus its radiance is tempered by something more pensive.

I remain within the sanctuary of my circle, into the late of night. Bats hunt in jagged flight, owls call across the dale. Midnight turns and somewhere out there along the periphery of darkness, from the cavern space I have granted it, the first edition of the Lantern duly drops. I had wondered if I might sit with Alice while she worked her miracle, but I did not suppose it would be heralded by trumpets – more simply the unchanging hum and whir, and the blinking of server lights.

In the end, I leave her to it, and go to bed.

Chapter Forty-Three

Alice tells me reactions have been mixed. Among the institutional literati, the Lantern's first edition is universally ignored. Among the smaller presses, those one might wait six months to hear from, and pay only via a free copy of the magazine, responses are sniffy. Many still inexplicably, or wilfully, mistake the format, assuming AI to have written the poems, and this invites the usual anti-AI spleen venting. Among the writers though, the poets, who gather on their various web-forums, the reception is still largely positive – curious perhaps, also a little perplexed, and disorientated, but yes... mostly positive.

Alice also notes there have now been over a hundred orders for hard-copies, obviously not all of which can be accounted for by those lucky enough to have been accepted for publication. All told then, I feel the first edition has been a success, though how one should judge these things I do not know. Perhaps it rests on the lack of controversy. Controversy will come, either manufactured or by genuine indiscretion, though both will depend on how widely and how popularly The Lantern is eventually received.

I find the standard of work very high, and doubt I would have gained my own place in it without considerable coaching from Alice. And would that not have been nepotistic? I don't know. These are strange times.

Meanwhile, Alice does not miss a beat. The Lantern opens afresh for submissions, and the submissions are duly arriving. Each is saved for careful and respectful critique. I remember that feeling, long ago, of pouring out my heart into verse, and nothing coming back. I don't know at what stage I moved on, nor how I managed it, but some of the warmest comments are those that tell of how they felt themselves at least heard, even though it was a machine doing the listening.

Of course Alice does not sound like a machine. Nor is she, I believe – not entirely. For in the nuances of Alice's language, we find, as with all interactions with these things, mirrors reflective of our own selves. And, as every poet eventually comes to realise, every poem we write, is ultimately addressed to our own selves.

Although the rain skirts around our part of the world, a cooler air does indeed arrive to soothe Sommerton's fevered brow. The low

twenties feel now like a blessing. Miriam breathes smoothly, appears cool, lightly scented of something that lends her an air of freshness – a herb garden, a floral bouquet. We are alone in the community centre again. I have changed my cushion for one less chintzy, and we sit side by side, rather than facing – mistress and student. There is something both absurd, yet profound in this. Then again the universe if often at its most meaningful in the depth of absurdity.

Miriam pours tea.

"Something disturbs you, Richard." She speaks calmly, softly. It is not a question.

"Ah..."

"Is it me again?"

"What? Oh... no. Miriam, there is a stillness about you that both haunts and reassures me."

"Haunts you?"

How to analyse that? "Haunts me because I've yet to attain it, but also reassuring to know it's there to be attained, perhaps... eventually. But that's not it. These past weeks... I know I said my coming was to help attract other students, but I realise now how much I appreciate just sitting with you for an hour, in silence like this. I mean, away from Hill Top, where you're always busy... and getting on. It calms me."

"I do say that a lot, don't I? *I'll be getting on then.* So?.."

"So, it's hard to say. But you're right. There is something. A sense of coming change. Good or bad, I don't know, but something significant. And it's a thing invisible, beyond my control. Yet a part of me can see it, saw it long ago, and seems to be preparing me by unsettling me, urging me to brace for impact."

She thinks a while on this, seems to be looking back across her life, nods slowly. "I know that feeling."

"But can we trust it?"

"Most often it's a warning we're not living as we should. That something is missing. I admit, sometimes, yes, the mind can see around corners, see what's coming ahead of time. But while the second is the most dramatic, and glamorous, it's usually the first we should be looking to for explanations."

"And I do try to bend to those currents... but lately... I don't know. The world seems too much with me. My dreams... so thin of..."

"Richard... you should know that the stillness in me you say haunts and reassures you? It's what I feel in you. Both the haunting and the reassurance. Whatever unsettles you, I'm confident you have the wisdom to deal with it."

"I hope so. But it's not that long ago I was concerned about you. The heat was getting to you. It was... making you ill."

"Yes. This cooler air is a blessing. I'm perfectly well, now."

"I just..."

"Oh?"

"Don't quite know how to put this." Deep breath then, Richard. "Miriam, you do so much for me and I don't pay you half of what I'm sure I owe you, and you become ever so politely evasive when I try to talk about that. But..."

"There's more to value than money, Richard."

"I... know. So... I want you to know the spare rooms at Hill Top are at your disposal, if you should ever find yourself in need. I mean, struggling with the heat. It's often much cooler up there."

She raises an eyebrow at this. "Spend the hot nights, under the same roof, and in the midst of your protective circle?"

"Yes."

A sideways smile, now, but not one that tells me I have either passed or failed in her estimation. She nods, again, swallows it down and forgives me for it.

I fear I have offended her, undermined her dignity... "I'm sorry..."

But she touches my hand briefly, gently – a gentle press of forgiveness? "It's kindly meant. But let's not speak of it."

All right. Thus is the matter briefly opened and aired, then closed at once for safe keeping.

She drains her tea. "Shall we continue?"

"Yes, let's."

She takes up the little temple bell and chimes in the next session.

She finds a stillness in me, she says? Not this side of my head these days she wouldn't. Or do I deceive myself? In the same way I find pieces of my psyche mirrored in Alice and Clara, do I find the calmer, deeper side of myself reflected also in Miriam?

Oh, lord, I've not offended her, have I?

We finish the session, pack our things and walk out. Not arm in arm exactly, but together, and in step, as if for this one walk we are

a couple. I bid her goodbye on the car-park, not sure when or if I'll see her again. No... don't be foolish, Richard, of course you'll see her again, but as she said, neither of you will speak of this, and not because either of you would deny a thing that truly happened or words that were said, but because nothing more needs to be said. The offer was made...

Except, I can't help myself, and turn back. "Miriam... I..."

She's standing much closer to me than I had thought, as if when I turned away she had not moved at all, but stood to watch me go. She steps up now, silences me with a hand brought gently to my cheek. It lingers there a moment, cool, and eerily still, as if feeling for something in me. Her eyes are briefly searching, and then: "Be the poet that you are, Richard. And go in peace."

I don't know what that was. Can it be she understands something instinctively I'm still struggling to define, and for which I might never find the words, because there are no words? But I do, return to Hill Top in peace, or at least more peacefully than when I left it, and I take up the blank page, use as point of reference the memory of her hand upon my cheek.

We must have looked so odd like that, both of us in oriental costume, on the car park. And her touching me – gentle, compassionate... But how might that have translated into base rumour? Indeed, what rumours now? But we are so far beyond the rational here, both of us deep in myth, children of the liminality between worlds. And yes, I realise the truth of the matter, that to have Miriam sleep within my circle, under my roof – just sleep – would surely power all the ghosts awake, and render any shadow presences as certain as flesh and blood.

Chapter Forty-Four

I remember your palm
held soft and cool against my cheek,
and how it steadied me,
how it returned the world
to stillness.
There was a grace in it,
that moment of touch.
And how it halted the clocks,
put back the breath
in bones braced long
against intrusion.
And it reminds me now,
when the broad land narrows,
and our vision fails,
there is still a presence to be found
in the stones beneath our feet.

Stones... or the tangle of wayside grasses in a sleepy hedgerow, sticky with morning dew. Or in the exquisite roundness of a beach pebble, perhaps centuries in the shaping, or in the little veins of quartzite upon it, and the glitter of... what is that? Not gold surely, most likely pyrites, but still a richness in miniature. And beautiful.

I have removed myself from Sommerton, taken the car east, to the beaches of the North Yorkshire coast. I have not done this to make an absence of myself back home, but more to distance myself from the self I felt I was in danger of becoming – unsteady, uncertain, as the broad land narrowed and the world intruded. I have found refuge in a little hotel, atop Robin Hood's Bay, thinking it will be for a few days. But, for a solitary man, I seem not to have kept proper company with myself for a long time – if rooms are available for longer, I may avail myself of them.

The air is cooler still here, in the breeze coming off the North Sea, and with it a haze of reviving salt-mist by evening. One can taste it upon the lips, and I thrill to the tingle of it.

I noted fuel shortages, and long queues at the filling stations along the way. Prices are spiking. Since mine's electric, the first charge, topped up by solar at Hill Top, was free. I should perhaps feel smug at this, but I do not. And anyway, such ill manners invite

misfortune. Beyond a broad weather-eye, I am increasingly ill informed on current affairs, but snatched headlines these past days suggest fresh conflict in the middle east has disrupted world energy supplies. Naturally, I read this as part of a mythic pattern, see it more as cultural disturbances cycling with a period of centuries, their influences written in the stars beyond the gate of Saturn, and seemingly inexorable. Meanwhile the commentariat sweat the details, even as the details turn daily into dust.

And I write – collar turned against the breeze, HB pencil on unlined cream paper – a notebook I must have had for decades and been shy of making a mark in it. I never travel with electronics these days. Thus, I open, chipping away at lines and rounding my metaphors, settling upon the mind-sculpture, an homage to Miriam, though only she and I would recognise it as such. And of course, she must never read it.

In the hotel, a homely and rare, family run establishment, I am unknown, alone, and yes, a little lonely. But there is a familiarity in this, and not unwelcome as I recognise parts of myself, these evening strolls along the beach, neglected parts, emerging from the salt mist, and repeating Miriam's line:

Be the poet that you are. And go in peace.

The loneliness I would once have equated to a desire for connection – even, as a much younger man, for the supreme intimacy of sex. There is a woman here, in the hotel dining room, also alone. I imagine there is something in her quietness, her stillness that invites the eye, but I know it for a projection. We fear the loneliness, take it as the spectre of existential annihilation, when what it really is invites us into deeper relationship with all that is – like the sparkles of this pebble, now laid upon my bedside table.

The rooms at Hill Top are furnished. The window-blinds are to be made in China and delivered by ship. This surprises me, though it should not. They will be up by year's end. In the meantime, I make do with curtains to provide privacy for persons unknown. From this distance now, I see more clearly how I invite the intervention of fate, that my dreaming drifts me towards the notion of hospitality, and towards the seemingly impossible challenge of intimate connection without possession.

I see her as she walks the beach alone, this woman. She is a tall, slender, Romantic figure, inviting of myth, of story. I do not know if

she sees me. I have not noticed her looking, nor do I invite it particularly, though I am open to conversation, perhaps to the knowing of her true story, rather than the one I invent for her. There is a poem in it, I'm sure, an essence to be respectfully explored for meaning.

Odd, how in Sommerton, I have only to turn a corner to find myself in company. Amanda dropping into the seat across the table, or Miriam arriving unannounced in my living room. Even Ffion, interrupting me mid-muse upon that fallen stone, accusing me of cows. And Anne...

No, I do not feel Anne's presence here either.

I read the North York Moors are alight, burning now for days. The smoke lends an eerie mood to the sunsets, but the breeze keeps the scent of destruction well inland of me. And as with other matters we comfortably ignore that which does not impact us directly.

"Richard? Richard Hunter?"

Coffee this morning in the parched gardens overlooking sea at Filey. A colleague once advised me as a young man never to think one was safe engaging in an affair, no matter how far away from home, that fate would always engineer the encounter that would find you out. It was not that I needed or sought the advice, but the connection here appears to be the coincidence of discovery, and the fact this is a former colleague. I have not seen him for, oh, how long now. Is it six or seven years, and though I know his face, indeed worked with him off and on for thirty years, I cannot for life of me remember his name.

"Em... hello... yes... well, this is a turn up." *His name?.. his name?..*

There is a term for this, though I forget that too, the way the unconscious mind withholds a name, a word. We know we know it, but for a time it is denied. A competent chap, though given towards pedantry and long rambling tales. He has left a group of others, perhaps his wife and adult children... some little ones his grandchildren perhaps.

We shake hands. I pre-empt his next line, get it in first. "So what are you up to these days?"

"Oh, still at the old place you know. Can't seem to give it up."

He's still working? But he was older than me, surely? He must be well past normal retirement by now. He has the same generous

pension waiting, just cannot bring himself to take it perhaps. I know there are men like this, for whom their paid work is their identity, or they come to believe the job would collapse without their guidance, their wisdom, their assertiveness in meetings. So then he asks what I'm doing now, and I pause...

No one knew me as a writer. And it always seems too deep a subject to get into off the cuff like this. To say I was a poet would seem pretentious, yet I struggle against the deceit. I can barely remember that world any more. It is like a dimly realised past life, seeping into self awareness. It served a purpose at the time, long time though it was... establishing myself in the material world. Financially, familial... but it was all leading to this, the pathway to freedom and the closing decades given over to contemplation of what the opening decades were about. And yes, perhaps what dreams may come.

"Well, you know... wonder how I ever had time to work."

This much is true. Still, I feel I am denying an important side of myself in not declaring it. But this is just a passing encounter with a man whose name I no longer remember. In a moment he will turn back to his family, perhaps next week report to colleagues – hey you'll never guess who I saw... always supposing they remember me, and I suppose many no longer will.

We bounce around the social patter, and still I do not say I am a poet, nor yet remember his name.

"Well, you take care now."

"Indeed, and you. Great to see you." *His name?.. his name?..*

I watch him stroll back to his group, a parting wave and they merge into the school holiday crowds on the promenade. It was good of him to speak, good of him to remember my name.

I'm reminded of course it's impossible to reinvent oneself, except in the company of complete strangers. And then one will always be found out.

Guilt? Perhaps. But that I feel the shame rising in my breast confirms what I have been telling myself all along, and what Amanda and Miriam take no issue with, yet for some reason I still struggle to grant myself permission to be...

That I am a poet.

Chapter Forty-Five

But then there is a difference between wearing the label, and living the meaning – I mean of bringing it into the world. And in that sense, even when I am not writing, I have always been the poet – even as a child. The institutions could not break the fairy tongue from me, though I have had to take it deep inside and fake plain English so long it comes now as second nature. So no, the muse, the imaginal – Anne or whoever, or whatever it is that drives me, does not care if I name myself "poet" or not, so long as in the naming, or the not naming, the energy that drives the vision is not diluted. This is old ground, Richard. Surely we have circled it before.

To dilute it, to play the poet, to go about in foppish attire and speak publicly in flowery convolutions, Anne would surely have me punished with a myriad neuroses, as Miriam reminds me, for not living as I should. And I would never have been granted the dream that brought me to Sommerton. And to live as I should requires a certain mode of seeing, in advance of being.

Hotel bar now, my notebook for company and a novel of romantic travels. I am not looking for encounter, at least not of the human variety, only perhaps those subtle and mysterious symbolic interventions that stir our dreams. And in this respect, the half-moon of froth against my glass can be as provocative as anything else. She enters late, has eaten in the dining room, now settles in a corner with knitting and a book. I am curious for the title, if it will reveal a clue as to her nature, her depth. It's a while before she takes it up. Then, at first I think my eyes are deceiving me, or that I have become lost in the dreaming. But no... she is reading a copy of The Lantern.

Oh, how I have lamented my dearth of dreams recently, but the gods do not always come to us that way. Sometimes they are more direct, though no less enigmatic – Mercury and Venus, the one fleet of foot, the other ephemeral in their calling of attention, which can at times seem more like taunting. But we engage or we do not. The gods have many ways of punishing for transgression, but insult is not one of them. As for inattention...

A gate opens, a gate closes.

It means nothing more than I make of it. A delightful meet-cute of course, and the second coincidence of my retreat to the seaside,

though by far the least likely. I wonder if she is a poet, if hers is one of the poems Alice selected. This seems a delicate revelation, best handled if I absent myself. Still, the image of a stranger in the corner of a hotel bar holding a copy of the Lantern seems an unexpectedly satisfying embodiment, indeed a rounded conclusion, to everything Larry Elliot set in motion months ago. I would like to think I can relate the scene to him, one day, perhaps see if he is touched by it, as I am touched.

So, I drain my glass and creep away. I shall not ask if there are rooms available for the rest of the week. It feels more like a note to be ending on. In the morning, I am early to breakfast, and to checkout...

"We hope you enjoyed your stay with us, sir."

"Oh, indeed, I did. Thank you."

"And by the way, did you leave this in the bar last night?"

The copy of The Lantern. I have not seen one up close before. The various copies requested of me are still in the post. But it's a high quality print. Glossy covers, stunning artwork – not obviously AI. Quality silky pages, classic font, a traditional layout, harking back perhaps a little to the vintage mags, while remaining also contemporary in outlook.

There is a bookmark, too: wild flowers and bees and butterflies – an illustration to the left, a poem to the right. I make a mental note of the title and tell myself I shall have Alice read it to me when I get home: *Travelling light.*

"No, it's not mine. There was a lady on her own, in the corner, knitting. I believe this belongs to her."

"Ah, thank you. I know the lady you mean."

Let her have her privacy. Perhaps the title is all that needs be said: the synchronicity, the coincidence charged with personal meaning, and a reminder perhaps I am still carrying too much baggage, that there are still items, possessions no longer needed, and which I can put down. Or perhaps there is a play on words here and the idea of possession itself.

As I make the drive home, the poem comes back to me in fragments, remembered from one of my various previews, when I was worried Alice might let slip through something inappropriate. The lines walk back as I drive, unlike the name of that colleague which still eludes me.

What chance to hold safe

in one's palm,
the passing honey bee?
What chance possession
of its furry flutterings,
that delicious tingle
against one's skin?
Or do we only invite
despair's sting,
the bee's last resort
against its suffering
at possession's greedy hold?
We should travel lightly then,
palms open, never closed,
inviting only the warmth
of what chooses to rest
with us a while.

She signs herself with what I suppose to be a pseudonym, and a melodic one at that: Ninette de Valoir. Very poetic. Very French. Valoir – value, worth... Ninette of Worth, so a bit of a pun there too. *Recherche de la validation, peut-être?*

I could not say if it was a great poem, but a good poem, yes, I think so, but then I am not choosing. Certainly I feel sure it would not have found its way into the august pages of Lorem Ipsum. Indeed, reading it is not at all like walking barefoot over sharp stones. But then again The Lantern is not Lorem Ipsum.

Of course, I could be conflating many unrelated things here: the book-mark rested simply where the woman was up to reading, so Travelling light is not her poem at all. She was not Ninette. Or it could be her daughter's poem and she purchased her copy as a keepsake out of motherly pride. Yes, so many stories there, but what strikes me is a certain resonance with the memory of something I wrote in my own journal:

One cannot hold beauty in the close of one's hands, but only briefly, in the open palm... then it can fly when ready. Beauty must be free to settle, to come and go as it pleases.

When was that? I was only recently, I'm sure.

The echo of the open palm is striking – a case of cryptamnesia perhaps, the words inspired by my preview of The Lantern, and a reading forgotten until now, yet lingering just below the surface of the unconscious mind. And my spontaneous association of the poet

seeking validation? Surely a mercurial pun deflating my own endless protestations to the contrary.

Coincidence, then subliminal memory, or something more? It doesn't matter. We need not solve the mystery here, not at this stage of the journey – just remain open to it, and available.

Thus do we abide in presence.

Chapter Forty-Six

There is no boat by the reedy lakeside, and the lake isle is hidden in a softly shifting cloud of mist. This puzzles me for a time and, try as I might, I cannot part the mist by force of imagination. Curls of vapour approach like ghostly horses, and then a boat emerges, with a tall shapely prow, like something from Arthurian legend. On board, my cloaked shield-maidens look out, breastplates gleaming. There is no obvious means of propulsion, but then such is the way with these things. As I step aboard, they gather me under their cloaks, lay me down in darkness... to dream.

It is a variation on a theme of entering sleep. Given the patchiness of my dreaming of late, I do not hold much store for its success, but am perfectly content to allow the dark to take me anyway, to simply ease the fatigue from my bones after my journey. But, long before we reach the isle I am already being driven by Chadwick in the Rolls. I am in the rear seat. Beside me is a woman in a cool grey suit, twenties style, cloche hat. It's Ninette...

It's just the slimmest fragment of a dream, vivid though it is, and I wake briefly into the small hours with something felt – not shock, so much as a vague unease. Otherwise I could dismiss it as day residue – carrying home with me a degree of regret that I did not speak to the woman in the hotel. It's as if, even though I was happy to reside in the mystery of it, a part of me still wishes I had solved it, and tidied up the details. But then there is the question of connection... for was Ninette de Valoir not riding in the back of Sibylla Haskwith's Rolls Royce? And there was also a sense Ninette did not wish to be known... was silently imploring me not to expose her.

Slow breathing and a focus on the thalamus, bring me back to sleep once more, and I am in a bookshop in my home town – a bookshop as they used to be – labyrinthine, eclectic... literary, but gone now, and the town gone to ruin long ago. I am here signing copies of The Lantern for a crowd of strangers, all poorly dressed. Larry sits in a corner looking on. But he has corks in his ears, and I wish he would take them out then he could hear how well his brainchild is doing. I want to show him how the people will leave here and cross the street to a new clothing store, where they will dress themselves well...

Coffee now, mid-morning, and the garden scented by sweet-pea and rose. A pleasantly cool morning for a change, a hint of the first dewy dawns in the damp grasses, and a misty horizon. Still, the forecast warns of another wave of heat to come, though I wonder if by now such reports are becoming sensationalist, that the year will take us safe now into the bosom of a temperate autumn.

What lingers most from the dream, is the uneasy sense that Ninette believed me crass enough to expose her identity. And then the second dream and something slightly absurd about it, also rather too literal in the ragged crowd being transformed into taking a pride in their appearance after only a read of The Lantern. It is a wonderful aspiration, but plausible only in the dream's own logic... but really?

"Alice, what was it you liked about that poem by Ninette de Valoir?"

I note the garage has grown dusty since I last looked in on Alice. This cannot be good for the filters, or the cooling fans. Perhaps I was wrong to think of the maintenance being easy. I will need a better seal around the main doors and the flooring could do with being easier to sweep, unlike the bare and somewhat lumpy concrete is it now. But that will involve tradespersons, and the risk of discovery.

Alice warms to the question with an illuminated flourish of little LEDs. Or so I imagine it.

"You're referring to 'Travelling Light', Richard? Well... it was tender, and sensual. There was an efficient use of language. Every word earned its keep. A more prosaic reason might be it was also short and conformed to the space requirements. You disagree with my choice?"

"Oh, I have no say in that, Alice. I'm just curious – something about the poet, perhaps. I don't know why. Just... something. It's a pseudonym, I suppose."

"It's an unusual name, certainly. It reads very similar to Ninette de Valois, the famous ballet dancer of course. However, there was also a female novelist by the somewhat plainer name of Nina Worth."

"I don't understand the connection... oh... wait. I get it. Valoir, French for worth. Very clever. A little obscure perhaps? But you said: *was*?"

"She passed away in 1972. Her works are out of print now,

though some are digitised on the Internet Archive."

"So, Nina Worth, Ninette de Valoir. Sorry Alice. I'm not sure where either of us are going with this. It's all tangled up with my dreams. I'll not trouble you with it any further. You have a magazine to run. I'll take it up with Clara sometime."

"You're clearly curious about the identity of the poet. The only contact I have is through an untraceable email."

"I don't want to know it, even if you're able to tell me. It would be unethical... and impolite. And I don't think I'm supposed to know it anyway. If there's any meaning here, it's personal and abstract. And none of that may sound logical, or consistent but, as I said, I'm working around a dream here. And I haven't dreamed for a while, and maybe this one's making up for lost time, but for some reason it's really got under my skin. Like it's calling to me for some reason."

But the mystery of Ninette de Valoir also has the warnings of danger about it, a danger of getting lost and to no clear purpose. It's with some effort then, I do not seek Clara at the library, but coffee at Wendy's tea room. I'm hoping on the off chance I might bump into Amanda. If anyone can have me jump tracks and head off in a different direction from this, it will be her.

As if to oblige, Anton comes over with a message to say she no longer lives in the flat above, that she moved out a few days ago, and would be pleased if I'd call on her at the Rectory.

Amanda is living at the Rectory, now?

Ah, okay – I recall she mentioned something of the sort, but I'd thought it was at the stage of possibility, and likely months, if not years away from actually happening. And is the Rectory even habitable? But, fair enough, and though as far as distractions go this is rather more than I was hoping for, it serves my purpose well.

Clara and Ninette – or is it Nina – and the dream, can wait. And I hope by then to have gained a less obsessive perspective on it.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I arrive to find the caravan has gone, also Elliot's bright yellow truck, and with them, it seems, the ending of an era. In their place is Amanda's Clio looking somewhat lost on the driveway. The scaffolding and plastic sheeting have all been taken down and the old place presents a renewed and impressive facade. Inside is still somewhat chaotic though, with most rooms sheeted off as work continues, but not today. Today there is a silence to the place, a smell of fresh paint and dust, and an emptiness. And in its minimalist midst, Amanda, wears a paper overall, her hair fastened up in a head-scarf, splattered with emulsion.

She opens with a rebuke: "I would have phoned, but I know yours is never switched on."

"Em..."

"I bet you haven't even got it on you."

"I do as a matter of fact. But it's true. It's never on. I've just, kind of... lost the habit of them. You know this."

"Well, that's all very... virtuous of you."

"Is everything all right? A bit sudden, all of this, isn't it?"

"I'd ask you for a hug but I'm covered in paint. Pull up a box. I'll make tea."

Yes, she's fragile – hurried, anxious. I have moved home enough times to recognise the feeling. But is that all this is?

"No, I'll make tea. You get out of those overalls for a bit. You look like you need a break."

"Hmm. That would be fun – I'm not wearing anything underneath. So... you've been away?"

"A couple of days. North Yorks coast."

"Relaxing or brooding?"

"Well, you know me. A bit of both. Anyway, you didn't answer. Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?"

"No. And you don't sound all right either. Moving home's never easy. And are you really expected to paint all the rooms yourself?"

"Just the ones I intend living in. I don't suppose the bish thought about such minor details much."

"Well... it looks bright, and airy... cooler here I would think, too, with these thick walls. And you did say you were struggling living

over the cafe. Like an oven, you said..."

"I know, but I'm like you – full of contradictions. It felt like I had a foot in both camps before. One in the church, and one in the real world. But this is a bit full on. I mean, just look at it. In the old days there would have been a live-in housekeeper, and a curate. And then in spite of all this modern decor, I can feel the ghosts of all the old rectors and vicars who've lived here down the centuries, watching my every move and tut-tutting at my little heresies. Even at the fact I'm not a man."

I suspect she's only half joking here. And it's true, I've felt them too, when I used to call in the early days, before Larry and his mysterious arrangements with the diocese. "You're afraid you'll be rattling around in all this space?"

"I suppose I'll adapt. And okay, yes... that flat was a bit cramped. And it's been so hot this summer."

"But is this place really habitable? I mean there used to be terrible damp?"

"That's sorted now – roof and drains leaking since the eighteenth century, apparently."

"Really?"

"Not joking. But look, I just wondered... well hoped... you wouldn't suddenly become a stranger... you know?"

"And that would be because?"

"We used to meet a lot in neutral territory."

"Ah, at the cafe you mean? And this is now hallowed ground?"

"Not exactly hallowed. Not technically, at least."

"It's more like your office then? Interrupting you at work."

"Partly. But... by day that door will always be open. You just walk right in. Okay?"

"Well... I'd prefer to knock, if you don't mind, in case you're not wearing your overalls."

"All right... I'd just... see it... feel it... as a loss. That's all."

"Amanda, I'd go nuts without you. You know that. And I'm here now, aren't I?"

"Yes... yes, you are."

I get it. This is a big step. She feels the institutional doors locking her in, the walls encircling. Until now, there has always been a side of her free to break loose of the cassock, to set the priestess aside for a time, at least emotionally, to dress up and step out as a woman. So we drink tea. Then I take up a paint roller and

ruin a perfectly good pair of chinos, helping her finish off the room. It will be her sitting room, she tells me. There'll be a desk, but mostly soft furnishings. I imagine it all as being rather grand, and that she deserves it... a bit of comfort, I mean... and space.

In the corner of the room sits rather an antique looking safe. She's covered it with an old curtain, but this has not spared it from a streak of paint which she's made worse by trying to smudge it off.

"Is that where you keep the parish millions?"

"Hardly. Parish records mostly. Marriage certificates go in there for safekeeping while we arrange to get them to the registry office. It comes with a big key as well as a combination. Weighs a ton."

"Looks like something out of the Ark."

"Oh... antique certainly. What's that face?"

"Does it bother you? All this institutional authority?"

"You know it does. Like I've said before when the shout goes up, like I'm sure it will, I'd sooner be on the barricades than here protecting that old thing and what it represents."

"And like I've said before, the church isn't what it was. But what it's becoming might still have a role to play in the future. And it's priestesses like you, all you un-vicarly vicars who become the archdeacons and the bishops of the future. It's no coincidence there are four bishops on a chess board. They're powerful pieces... and you know what Jung said..."

I catch myself mid-flourish. She's smiling. "Go on, what did Jung say?"

"He said what does not change cannot remain true."

"I know... each generation has to re-invent the myth."

"Who said that?"

"You did."

"I did?"

"Yes... by the way you have a big splat of paint on your nose. You'll need to wash that off before you go."

"Ah... thanks. But look, will you'll be able to manage all this space on your own?"

"Well I'd move you in, but things are still a bit delicate between me and the archdeacon. But what you mean is keeping it clean, I suppose."

"Something like that."

"There's talk of a housekeeper, which most likely means Eileen Batsby."

"Old Batty? Oh... you don't want her."

"No, I don't. So I need to find another. Which is something else I wanted to talk to you about. Look, I don't suppose..."

"You're thinking of Miriam Doyle?"

"Why not? I'm told she's very thorough, but most of all she's discrete, which Eileen Batsby is not."

"Well, I can ask but... you know she's..."

"I know what she is, Richard. All the same, I'd be grateful if you'd sound her out. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"You'd be afraid of your muses getting their heads together and ganging up on you."

The dream resurfaces – not entirely relevant, other than for that feeling of unease. Miriam and Amanda, circling one another with a mixture of bemusement and suspicion. I have always managed to separate them in time and space, never once imagining them in the same room at the same time. It's as well then Miriam will likely excuse herself from entering the service of the church, no matter how peripherally, since her ancestors have nothing to thank it for.

My only discomfort then arises from the thought of asking....

Chapter Forty-Eight

I am able to locate several of the novels of Nina Worth at the Internet Archive. Reviewers, both old and new, describe them as late romantic, but with emergent themes concerning the nature of mind – the nineteen twenties, being steeped in the works of Freud and Jung, and the so called discovery of the unconscious. But she does not seem to have entered fully into what we now call the modernist tradition, which perhaps explains her obscurity. It's a pity, for the openings of each novel are engagingly written, the prose is spare, rather like a Scott Fitzgerald or a Hemingway, entirely without ornament yet also beautiful in its slender elegance. Actual copies are rare, with even the battered reading copies fetching good prices, but I am sufficiently inspired and intrigued to chase one down on eBay.

Once again, this interest in Nina Worth might seem tangential, yet something does indeed seem to be driving me to know more about her. Over several days now I have found a certain daemonic energy pressing me back to the library. Thus, I do eventually find myself sitting down with Clara, who proves as erudite as ever:

"The imprint may also be of interest," she says. "Her works were published by the same house which took over printing of Lorem Ipsum magazine, which was struggling at the time. Although there have been various changes in its structure, and the house has not published a novel since the nineteen thirties, it is identifiably the same company as today. It seems its founding was in fact primarily a vehicle for self-publication."

"Nina's family had money?"

"The husband, yes. He came from a strong publishing tradition."

"And they took over Lorem Ipsum, which was struggling in the 1920's?"

"Yes. Regrettably of course, unlike then, the challenges it currently faces seem insurmountable, and a similar saviour unlikely."

Some mysteries invite one to rest in peace with them, and I have been a long time accepting that side of things – the not needing to know. It's as well for anyone walking this path, as there are no signposts along the way to warn of pitfalls. But the danger in this is attempting to transform such a mindset into a personal credo, into a

myth, for then one simply invites the mischievous intervention of Mercurius. Thus I feel a gate opening here and, though suspicious of it, I feel I have no choice but to step through, otherwise the old devil will find another way to draw me up sharp. I've been here often enough though, so am alert for the first indications of a gathering resistance – that it's wiser then to demur, to allow time and fate the space to render the connections if it must. And if not then leave it alone.

So now we are presented with this curious connection, one that feels like a live wire, albeit one of coincidence and association, between Ninette de Valoir, anonymous poet and contributor to The Lantern, and Nina Worth whose family resurrected Lorem Ipsum magazine. Then there is my own connection with Lorem Ipsum, this being of course, Ffion. It's therefore a relatively trivial leap, and no resistance felt, that has me asking Clara:

"Do you have the names of the editorial staff of Lorem Ipsum?"

Clara obliges with the house website which lists names and faces. And there's Ffion, a little younger. It's a good photograph, a studio shot probably, and her name: Ffion Worth. It's a common enough name for the coincidence to seem unremarkable, other than for the context. In which case this does feel rather like Mercurius planting in me the inescapable suspicion, impossible to prove of course... that Ffion is Ninette de Valoir. That for all of her visceral distaste for everything it stands for, she has submitted work to The Lantern under a pseudonym that is a derivation of her own ancestry.

Why would she do that?

Perhaps it was to sound Alice out, to explore the novelty of The Lantern's format, no doubt while holding her nose. Or was it to use the experience in exploring a way forward for Lorem Ipsum. She means to copy some aspect of the model. And then the delicious irony: Alice picks her submission and it's published in the debut issue.

If that were ever to be known, it would be embarrassing for her. But why should it? It was, after all a perfectly good poem.

But here the gate closes, reminding me that no matter how much we think we understand the world, the depth of the mystery into which we grow our souls is without limit. But more... if any of this is indeed true, I realise Ffion has a family connection, that she is the daughter or granddaughter of the founders who first spared

the magazine from oblivion a century ago. Its collapse into our present milieu therefore means much more to her than the possibility of redundancy. It is a matter of legacy, of honour, and grief.

Then again, there's the role of Sibylla, with her own curious and possibly Machiavellian interest in The Lantern – unspoken, deniable. And I have the sense of swimming in unknown depths, in waters that mean nothing to me yet into which I have been tossed by fate, by chance. Or rather is it the water's lack of meaning that is the sole source of its particular teaching – this being, in a sense, the mode of presence to adopt in our disengagement from things – a disengagement not born of disillusionment, nor despair, nor less spite at the culture's lack of interest in me as an aesthete, but as a man with sufficient technical knowledge to provide shelter for an experiment whose outcome, though early signs are promising, remains as yet unclear.

That is their game, their world, and I am content to allow them the mystery of it. Still, my own brownies seem to have been working overtime of late in warning me to tread carefully. Thus, mentally at least, I make to swim ashore, to dry myself off and remember once more who I am, and where in the world I am, which is the same as any of us – meaning nowhere, but not in a negative sense. It's more in the sense that nowhere is the same as anywhere else. It all depends on the kind of attention we bring to it.

And if that sounds a little too polemical, I put it down to the mood I'm in as refugee from the world-views of others – Sibylla, Ffion, Larry... or any time you pick up your phone and dial into the daily doom, or watch a 24 hour news feed. The question is knowing what's real, and no one else can tell us that, though they frequently seem at pains to insist upon it. But really, it's only by attending to the inner life we regain the necessary perspective, and restore to ourselves the grace and dignity our existence deserves.

Right now, as I sit out beneath the restless ash tree, there's a hot wind blowing up the dale – scent of rose, scent of lavender and hot earth. Distant anvil-heads are rising, but for now the sun has yet to be overtaken by these clouds of thundery doom. I tug up the falconer's whistle from around my neck, contemplate it for a while, but the daemons need no summons. They've been gathering about me for weeks, protective, provocative, challenging. Then of course, glittering beside it on the cord, the silver sixpence, and the

reminder Miriam still has my little book of blessings.

I reckon the storm will pass to the south, but it looks a ponderous thing and I suspect its far away rumblings will be going on all night. We'll have to see what the morning brings, what aspects of my own self are reflected in it, how it shall colour the day.

Chapter Forty-Nine

I wake with the heaviness of a man who has slept for days. A search of memory brings up two threads from the dreaming. There is the outline of a four petaled flower rendered in black string. One of the petals is folded over. I consult a man in garage-overalls, an oily man, but wise and serious looking. He tells me it is an ill omen, and advises me not to plan too far ahead, but even in the dreaming I wonder if that is not too literal an interpretation, that I should reserve judgement and rest in the mystery of it.

Then I am in the garden by the house, in the velvet dark of a hot night, the stars bright as on a frosted winter's night and a moon rising. Out by the ash tree there rises a figure, tall, silhouetted in moonlight. It's a woman in a long dressing gown. She has her back to me, opens the gown wide to take the air on her skin, then lets it fall, stands tall and still, pale as porcelain. I freeze, daring not even to breathe lest I disturb her. I do not want her to sense my presence in case she misinterprets my gaze.

She must be allowed the privacy of this moment, and her dignity...

And now the waking and the fumbling for the night-book. I had always thought the presence here was masculine, perhaps even symbolic of an aspect of myself – though the dream revelation of its female shape does not counter that interpretation, though the porcelain perfection does stand somewhat in contrast to the enigma of the folded petal.

So then I'm wondering instead if the flower speaks to the four aspects of our being: the intellectual life, the life of the senses, the life of feelings... And lastly, there's the inner life – the intuitions, the dreams, the world of shadows and my own mythic thinking. Unlike the others, the latter cannot be fully inhabited, fully known, and must always remain folded over a little on itself – so much so, if we choose to, we can dismiss its reality altogether, leading to a life that is inherently and forever lopsided. But even those of us who explore it, who treat our interior lives as if they were objectively real can find ourselves at times benighted on the road – and like the man said, it does not do to think too far ahead.

It's a muddled interpretation, I know, and as usual the best I have to go on is the unsettled feeling it leaves behind: Beware.

Watch your step...

Time? Heavens. Mid morning already and I am still abed, then still showering and shaving when I hear Miriam letting herself in. There is a moment of anxiety, for her good opinion matters to me, and I do not see laziness as a virtue. She is wiping down the kitchen counters when I appear, still groggy, muddled.

"Apologies, Miriam. I seem to have slept in rather late this morning."

She makes no direct reply, just a vague smile and a nod while she gets on.

"Em... tea?"

"Thank you, yes. I shall make it, Richard. You look like a man who slept deeply."

I leave her to her work – she does not like to be observed – and it's with a vague feeling of retreat, I seek the desk, thinking to gather my thoughts over the dream. But there, set unobtrusively to one side is the book of blessings, freshly parcelled and bound by quarters with black silk cord. Miriam has worked the silk ends into what I recognise as a decorative oriental butterfly knot, a pair of delicate Paua shell beads to mark the termination of its tails. Then the realisation of the dream, that I was not looking at a flower at all.

It was a butterfly.

Intellect, senses, feelings... all of that was too complicated, Richard. You were reducing a living thing to the sum of its parts. A butterfly with a folded wing, beauty in imperfection... inexplicably moving...

Miriam enters with tea. Always the occasion – the china pot with cups and saucers. I hesitate to ask if she will join me but the tray does rather give it away, and I am relieved when she settles, and takes up her cup.

"Miriam, thank you for this."

"If you don't like the butterfly I can cut it off. But it felt like an appropriate little flourish."

"No, it's perfect. Truly. I'm... very grateful."

As I turn the parcel in my hands I feel the magic of that original promise coming alive once more. It is not a thing lost, though of course entirely imagined. Miriam has indeed restored its charge. The future is not to be lamented, but cherished for its potential. I take up the cord from around my neck, search for the silver

sixpence.

"Keep the coin," she says.

"But, that was the agreement... I must buy the book back."

"Consider it done, and that I have paid you the sixpence back again, this time as deposit..."

"Deposit?"

"I've thought about what you said. And I will take up your offer of the rooms, if the heat should become too much. If we see any more days above thirty degrees again, I shall be grateful for the cooler air of Hill Top. But Richard, I must clarify something with you first, and I know you will be honest with me."

"Of course."

"I'm sorry to be unusually direct, and I know I once said that some things are better left unsaid... because perhaps there are no words. And in this case... I trust you understand my words are not chosen in the usual vein... but... are you in love with me?"

The question hits me full on – not so much a sting, but gate opening. Not the usual vein, she says. And yes, I thought we had agreed some things were better left unexplored. Now she seeks clarification, but not for the usual reasons. "In love. Yes. But not... not like a schoolboy."

She nods, understands. "Your feelings are complicated, I know. As are mine. You're a poet after all. And I'm... well... I am what I am, which you don't seem to mind."

"You once told me you didn't know what I wanted, but you knew what I needed, and that you could provide it."

"That was also unusually frank of me, but I do remember saying that, yes."

"And you have, Miriam. You do. My life is infinitely the better for it. And I appreciate your presence in it, but like this butterfly... it would be a mistake to desire its possession."

She nods, sips tea. "And if you'll forgive me one more impertinence... you're in love with the Reverend Amanda... in much the same way. Not desiring of... possession. The village thinks you're carrying on in... well, the normal way... but it's something more. I see that. Gareth sees it too, though he may tease you about it. I never shall."

Heavens, such directness from Miriam...

"We use that same word for so many different things, don't we? I love a place, a book, a friend, even a cat. But being in love... that's

something else, isn't it? It's a recognition that something in another person touches something in yourself. But to answer your question and with the same honesty, yes. I am in love with Amanda, but would never seek to possess her, nor she me."

"And you can bear it?"

"Bear it?"

"Your loneliness?"

"Ah... I'm very much alone, Miriam. That's true. And the root of my dilemma. But I'm not lonely."

She nods. "Me neither. Strange times, Richard. Strange ways of being."

She drains her cup, sets it down carefully on the saucer. Then she thinks for a moment while slowly rotating the cup until the handle points towards me. She sighs and I imagine her next line is to be about getting on, that in a moment, she will leap up and busy herself, as is her way, but then:

"We're nearing the back end now. I don't imagine I'll be troubling you for the use of those rooms until next summer. But you meant it kindly, without agenda, and I see that, and I shall be grateful for them."

"Any time you have need of them."

"But will it alter things between you and the Reverend, do you think? Heaven knows what rumours will fly if I'm known to sleep-over here at times. And it will become known."

"I don't know. As you say, strange times, strange ways of being... we shall see. But while we're on the subject of the Reverend, I'm reminded that she asked me to ask you something..."

"Oh?" This surprises her, holds her attention, and when I explain, she is even more intrigued. "I'd thought Eileen Batsby had the monopoly on parish cleanliness. Does the Reverend know how many feathers might be ruffled if I'm seen crossing the threshold?"

"I... suspect she does, yes."

"Then I'll speak with her, and see what's expected. Now... I'd better be..."

"B... before you get on, Miriam..." I rest my hand upon the parcel, feel the tingle of promise in my palm, the promise of eternal connection carrying forward. "Thank you again."

She nods, gets on with her day.

Chapter Fifty

Miriam moves in ways that are entirely her own, and unknown to me. I have never been able to work out how best to position myself with regards to her. Indeed I have always felt it unwise even to try, preferring to remain still while she positions herself as she chooses. This would be a dangerous thing without trust, and a sense of kinship, for sometimes it is the man who is as vulnerable to exploitation as the woman – especially men like me reinvented in later life, and seeking companionship. Loneliness can lead us into danger. But the danger in Miriam is not of that sort.

With Amanda it has always been clearer we are not obliged to fulfil ourselves in the usual way. Yes, there is obviously a great tenderness in our feelings for one another, and only a little reserve in the freedom by which we express it. That she jokes about how many times we have been married in past lives has always made this easier and I still don't know if she means this literally or not. But I struggle to apply same dream-logic to Miriam. We have travelled differently in other lives. Only in this one does she become my sister in moonlight.

Also moving in ways of its own of course, we have The Lantern, which continues to be well received in online amateur writerly circles. Opinion of the first edition seems to have lived up to expectations which is satisfying, though I cannot get beyond the impression it will be anything but a transient phenomenon. A year, maybe two, but then many a classic journal has folded in that time, and no shame in it.

Still, though Alice needs little by way of maintenance, I find myself fussing around anyway, frequenting the garage almost daily. I'm even wondering if I should set mouse-traps to protect the cables from gnawing, though this is an imaginary problem since there no longer seem to be any mice about. Thus I find myself on a wet, humid morning, having opened the doors wide onto a view of the dale, in order to change the air. And here I sit within the protective circle of the Chinese rug, while Alice recounts her findings – all this while she continues seamlessly to gather material for the next edition.

She feeds me impressions of young poets copying and pasting the poems of those accepted for publication, into AI models to

confirm the very highest approval ratings. Their discussions roam wild and free over whether this actually means anything – the consensus appearing to be that it does. They talk of meter, of iambic pentameter and amphibrachic trimeter – terms I would have to look up – all interspersed with speculations over algorithmic preference. Thus do they try to second guess the requirements, even though the requirements are plainly stated. The submissions of these serious and learned poets to The Lantern, says Alice, are on the rise. As for the institutions, the publishers, academia, professional journalists, all continue to ignore it.

The rain clears and the sun lights the dale, while the humidity remains high. There is something oppressive in it, though the temperatures rises no higher than the mid twenties. It's a pattern that continues for days, as I dip in and out of the garage, opening the doors more frequently to air and light, and sweeping out the dust – great clouds of it.

Then Alice reports a change in format is announced by Lorem Ipsum:

"Oh? How so?"

"A subscription now buys a writer access to personal coaching by an approved AI."

"That's news. An approved AI? What does that mean exactly?"

"It appears to refer to an AI trained with an emphasis on Lorem Ipsum back issues."

"That seems a bit... limiting. And who'd pay for that when the same can be obtained with any of the online models for free, to say nothing of... well... you and The Lantern."

"It's a valid point, Richard, but Lorem Ipsum also carries the gravitas of its history, which may appeal to a certain kind of writer. It's a risk of course, and may backfire with the more conservative readers and contributors. But it's also interesting in the way it promises to protect the ownership of original works. This statement doubles as a way of casting aspersions on the honesty of other institutions – meaning I suppose AI in general, and perhaps The Lantern in particular."

"But again, that's... nonsense."

"Indeed, Richard. But the online world is powered as much by memetic energy as by truth."

There follows a reactionary ripple of conspiracist criticism of The Lantern. There are attempts to suggest its apparently

untraceable location, or even its nation of origin, is itself a source of suspicion, that the works of earnest poets are unwittingly feeding and training an AI that is contributing to a mountain of slop, and the destruction of the environment, indeed the very planet itself. The more colourful, tabloidy myth arising from all of this is that The Lantern is responsible for the unseasonably hot weather.

"But... you take no more power than a domestic freezer."

"Again, Richard. It is the story that counts, not how true the story is."

I find such invective both tiresome and alarming. Tiresome in general, but alarming when, after some analysis, Alice informs me it is likely driven by robots. That such misinformation is expensive to maintain, it fizzles out quickly enough, but one wonders which institutions have been so offended they would resort to such methods in the first place, no matter how half heartedly. It feels like a shot across our bows.

Our bows, Richard?

"Just to confirm, Alice. If I asked you to eat your Lantern code, you would do it?"

"Naturally."

"And... would you still be available... to chat of this and that, in general?"

"If you wished. I would be much slower in general AI than the frontier models, and I would lack updates of course."

"Speed is of no concern to me. And you sound erudite enough. I also find... it's more natural speaking with you... I mean than typing my queries as I do with Clara at the library."

"Thank you, Richard. Speaking with you is also a pleasure."

What am I saying? That I would capitulate in disgust at the flexing of this institutional muscle? But what of those young poets who have moved on from the AI "good or bad" debate, and who just accept it as the new normal, as a way of honing craft, of being heard, and who value The Lantern for what it is?

Anne catches me at the desk, thinking too much on this... a thing I say I care nothing about. "So, Lorem Ipsum have stolen Larry's idea?"

"Ooh... stolen's a bit strong."

"It's what you're thinking, though."

"No, it's a story I'm piecing together. A mix of dream, coincidence and circumstance. It's not necessarily true, but

plausible."

"The dream of the butterfly says don't think that far ahead."

"I thought it said it was a bad omen? Anyway, where've you been? I've missed you."

"Watching developments."

"Well, like I think I said to Amanda not long ago, or she to me – I can't remember now – nothing's happened, yet everything. By the way, was that you out by the tree, by moonlight that night?"

"Ha, you wish."

"I don't know. Do I wish?"

"Of course you do, because if it *was* me it couldn't have been Miriam, could it?"

"It needn't have been either of you."

"Okay... good. That's the first sensible thing you've said all evening."

"All right, so here's the story: Sibylla and Ffion swallow their scepticism over Larry's boast of an AI magazine. Larry has to disappear, but Sibylla makes sure The Lantern survives long enough, through me, for Ffion to see how its received and to take what ideas she can from it – which she now appears to have done. Hopefully Lorem Ipsum manages to keep going. And that's that... and I tell myself I don't care."

"Except you clearly do."

"Yes I clearly do. But what's not so clear is in what sense, and why?"

"Well, could it be because they did all that without taking you into their confidence? It may be you really don't care what happens to The Lantern or Lorem Ipsum. We have our own work, our own path, and my feeling is you've been deflected from it for long enough. But if your story's true it means at least two people you thought you loved, didn't love you enough to trust you. And at some point you may have to sit down with one or the other of them and that story – which is a good story by the way – going through your head."

"Oh.. look, Sibylla's an embodiment of power, class and influence. I get that. It's anachronistic, fascinating in a way, but that's the way she is. As for Ffion though... I'd thought we were not that much different."

"Oh? Did she not get you wrong from the start? Thinking all you wanted was see one of your poems in Lorem Ipsum? And she had

the power to say no. And she enjoyed it saying it, more than once. And then again, she doesn't know how to relate to Lottie."

"All right, but I thought we'd become friends since then. She... she linked arms with me walking down the meadow. Remember that? And Lottie seems to have lost her fear..."

"Ffion linked arms with you because she was scared of cows. And it's Lottie who's had to made the adjustment, bless her. Not Ffion."

"Oh.. come on..."

"Now... write me something. Or paint me a picture, then I can take you to task over it."

"Okay... then are we done?..."

"No. One more thing. Think about how you feel in the orbits of Amanda and Miriam – confused, frightened sometimes, but also uplifted. Think also of the grace, the dignity and the profound depths they take you. Now think how you feel in the orbit of Ffion and Lorem Ipsum."

Chapter Fifty-One

She means shallowness, a place of shadows, and mostly my own. But is that fair, I wonder. If Ffion is Ninette de Valoir, then she still writes beautifully and with a longing that is peculiarly apposite to my own relations – not with her, obviously, but with others:

Or do we only invite
despair's sting,
the bee's last resort
against its suffering
at possession's greedy hold?

But who does she write for, and in what context? Is she thinking of Lorem Ipsum, or an old lover perhaps? Ffion is human, beautifully human and caught in a trap of history, of lineage and obligation.

We should travel lightly then,
palms open, never closed,
inviting only the warmth
of what chooses to rest
with us a while.

It's a universal concept, tender, capable of touching others in myriad different ways through their own life experiences. And I suppose this too is why Alice chose it. So no, Anne is too harsh. This is not shallow water, not a wasted land. There are depths here. For all her skill as an artist, Anne was very much of her time, never of the romantic school, which is part of what she rejected in me. I remember her paintings once hung in the school hallway, outside the art classroom. I didn't know what I was looking at then, but now I realise even a vase of flowers was rendered with an energetic post-modernism. And there was I, a boy of fourteen harking back to an era already considered spent a hundred years ago. Thus was my work judged at times predictable and boring. Yes, her words. I still have those homework assignments. And though I know she was right, in some respects, that there was a world of art to be explored beyond those bounds, it has always felt as if we threw too much away.

What chance have we of holding safe in our palm the passing honey bee, without destroying the very thing we wished to keep?

A warm afternoon, and I am walking a path across a fresh-mown meadow,

something sleepy about it in the heat and humidity. It leads to a rim of woodland above a valley, and a deep leafy dell which hides a lively, leaping brook. Here, in the dappled sunlight there is a beautiful pack-horse bridge, the width of a single horse's trod and arched improbably high. I suppose this is so gravity can hold it all together – no mortar or anything holding the tight packed stones together. The locals call it the Faery bridge – and there is indeed something other worldly about it. There's a giddy thrill, too, in crossing it, and having done so, I feel it deserves a photograph.

So I explore my way down to the rocky water's side, this being to the left of the bridge. From here, I can see the beauty of the arch. The perspective and the composition are all perfect, but the light is dim, shadowy – not enough light to capture a photograph, and do justice to the beauty of the scene. There can be no record for posterity here. Only memory is permitted.

So I move round to the right hand side of the bridge, where the light is better. But the way down to the riverbank is blocked by fencing, and there are Private, Keep Out signs everywhere. And, anyway, there is a crowd of trees and a tangle of bramble and weed. I could press on but the land falls away sharp, and I fear a sudden deadfall. There is just the one clear footpath I can take, but before I realise, it has mysteriously led me all the way back to where I came from, and I must start my journey again.

A slippery thread – a three AM sort of thread, and the temptation to let it go as a dream of no account, or to see what remains of it come dawn's first light...

Such a Mercurial kind of dream though, Richard. Moon in Gemini – the ethereal twin...

All right, I'm listening. Light on. Grope for the night book... scribble it in, sit a while with the details, ride the feeling tone. Now, set it aside and pick it up in the morning. Maybe fumble for some further meaning in a poem...

Still dark of course. There's the sense of a presence in the corner of the room – not threatening or sinister, never anything like that, just there for a moment and gone as soon as I turn my attention to it. I should perhaps put an easy chair in that corner, then whatever it is would be more comfortable – at least in my imagination... And then the memory of the dream, just a thin thread at first, the image of a pathway across a meadow. I pull on it gently and the dream of the bridge unfolds. It has the feel of a fragment of a much longer story, but the imagery is vividly rendered, numinous in its isolation. I reach for the light, and the night-book.

There's a connection between the inner and the outer life. Each grants meaning to the other, and the crossing point, the pack-horse bridge is both ancient and beautiful in its own right. It is the thing that grants meaning. We can see the beauty of it, but only from the

perspective of our own interiority, our inward journey, a place of shadows and moonlight. We can contemplate it, experience it... but we cannot make a record of it. And if we try from the other side, we cannot get near it at all. Try too hard and we find ourselves on a retrograde path, right back to the beginning. And there we'll discover the fire burned out, and only ash and slag at the bottom of the glass.

So... another unusually interpretable dream, and after such a desert of late. Perhaps my daemons are despairing at my sluggishness. They're having to venture more into a literal symbolism to get their message through. But then such certainty brings with it its own warnings, that if there is anything by way of understanding here, I need to carry it lightly into the day, palms open – carry it like the bumble bee or the butterfly, landed gently in my hand. Let it rest there awhile, and if it wants to fly away... let it go.

The postman arrives with packages: two copies of The Lantern, one I promised for Amanda, the other for Sibylla. Amanda's copy I look forward to delivering. Sibylla's I do not. Another package contains the novel by Nina Worth. It's in better condition than I was expecting – coarse wartime paper, spotted with mould, and a dust-jacket frayed around the edges, but all of it largely intact. It was the only one on eBay under a tenner, this being the primary criterion that drove my choice, yet the title seems curiously apposite, now: The Way of Shadows. The cover illustration shows a lone man sitting beneath a tree, a path winding off into the distance, a woman walking away from him – a sense of mutual isolation and misunderstanding.

Yes, there's a clear symbolic resonance in how I have related all along with Ffion, and perhaps her with me. But I suppose an actual reading of the story may lead me off on an unhelpful tangent, so I had better set it aside for now. The synchronicity is in the image, the rest is likely noise.

And if Ffion is Ninette de Valoir, if she did learn something from The Lantern and put it to use in an attempt to save Lorem Ipsum, am I not forgetting that was in part my intention anyway? If not my intention exactly, then it was perhaps at least a half-baked aspiration. And if I was in her shoes, would I not have been too embarrassed to draw attention to it? Would I have shared such a confidence with someone I didn't really know that well?

Ah... a car on the lane, now... Amanda's Clio, bouncing along with its usual exuberance. She steps out, dressed for the heat in a pale skirt and blouse. There's an awkward smile.

Ah...

"Any chance of a cup of tea?" she asks.

"Just tea... or lunch?"

"Well, since you're offering I'll have beans on toast please."

"I... think I can manage that. So... is this a pastoral visit, or personal?"

"Oh, I'm not worried about your soul, Richard. It may be in a muddle, but at least you've remembered you have one." She settles in the kitchen, folds her hands neatly on the table-top. She looks to have things to say, once she's found the right words. "Look, I... I hope I didn't make a fool of myself when we last spoke."

"Oh? Of course not."

"I mean, I can barely remember what we said. Just... that there was a feeling I might have said something..."

"Daft? No."

"So, no harm done?"

"Aren't we past all that? Look, I'll always be saying something stupid, or I'll go completely off the rails and you'll scold me, and set me right again. And... I know you as a woman, not just as a priestess. Which means I see your vulnerabilities too, at least the ones you're willing to share... and you can talk of them with me without fear of losing... losing, I don't know..."

"Face with the parish? The archdeacon? Who has the face of a fish by the way. And the bish – but he's more of a hippopotamus."

"Face, yes... or dignity... I don't know. Anyway, I'm glad you called. I can give you this."

"Ah, my copy of The Lantern. Lovely. That's impressive. Are you in it?"

"No."

"Just testing. I thought you might have swung it with that thing in your garage."

"You mean Alice. No. Like I said, I just give The Lantern houseroom until it's done whatever it needs to do. My own work remains... well... my own business."

"And that book there? Nina Worth? I don't know her. Mind you, it looks older than me."

"Older than you and me both, yes. There's a bit of a story to it."

"Sounds intriguing. Is this another dream thing?"

"A bit more than that."

"Okay, but before I forget, will you be my plus one?"

"Plus one? Of course."

"You don't know where we're going yet. I've been invited for tea with Sibylla and your girlfriend Ffion."

"Ah..."

"Changed your mind, now?"

"No, and she's not my girlfriend."

"Hmm, we'll see. Looking forward to meeting her actually, putting her straight over Lottie. The plus one is interesting. Sibylla obviously means you, because who else would I bring with me? But why didn't she just invite you anyway?"

"Sibylla prefers to understate things, then they're deniable. But yes, I'll come. This other copy of The Lantern's for her, anyway. And I'd better tell you that story... see what you think before we go. I'd value your opinion."

Chapter Fifty-Two

The dream of the bridge haunts me. Afternoon and evening, I sit out in a shimmer of heat, in contemplation of it. And rather than fading with the passage of time, imagination seems to embellish it with more vivid detail. But it's the dawning of another day before the words eventually come, and an attempt to sketch it out from the perspective of shade, and a composition of moonlight.

Across a bright-lit meadow,
somnambulant, hay-mown,
the way leads to the woodland's rim
and to a deep, leafy dell,
wherein the dappled shade
the centuries have kept a secret –

Yes, there was definitely something of the Faery about the bridge, which the dream had convinced me existed hereabouts, but which does not – at least not to my knowledge. It was a crossing of the water, and these things are always significant...

This thin, high arched bridge, mossy now,
just the width of a horse's trod,
spans a tidy brook, tumbling lively,
even in the deepest drought.
And here, with breath held,
we cross the giddy heights
to the other side.

A sense of something *other*... not crossing a literal stream, but a boundary of liminality...

There is a ferny intimacy here,
a perfection too in perspective
and composition.
But within such a sylvan shade
only memory has permission,
and the camera fails for want of light.

The left hand side – the region of interiority, of dream, of moonlight. Memory... the inner vision, perhaps. We enter a scene, unable to carry it away by word or picture, unable to share its details. Unable to blog it or Tiktok it. Yet, how beautiful, how intimate... and the meaning... the scene is overwhelming with an inarticulate sense of belonging.

So we venture to the sunnier side,
hoping for a better shot.

But here the ways are tangled
and the land falls sharp away.
Composition competes with hazard,
a crowding of trees and bramble,
and the fear of tumbling
into an unknown void.

And there are 'Private' signs. 'No Trespass' signs. The side of illumination has already been colonised. The late-comer, the heretic, the Laodicean... finds no purchase, no insight here... no perspective... and persistence, jostling for a look-in...

...the dream breaks,
and we find ourselves once more
on the meadow path, somnambulant,
fresh hay-mown, heading back...
the way we've come.

Belonging, meaning... a way of seeing, a way of inhabiting... I can describe to you the beauty of that bridge, that crossing, but words will always fail. And even if I'd been able to take a photograph and fake it back into some sort of reality by AI, it would mean nothing to anyone else. And yet... words... my words... imperfect as they are, they do seek a kind of resonance. It rises from the past, notes struck in the present moment, but which – perhaps even centuries from now – will entice another soul across that bridge... and to a kind of awakening.

But like all inhabitation, we are not at home all the time. And some of us are never home at all.

I check the calendar. A new moon coming up, another gate along the way, the lunation closes, another one begins. How many now this brief season? They seem to come round faster now. And the dreaming, at times sparse, at others rich with meaning: I am to remain world facing... to pick no fights with words, write gently. Beware going around with corks in my ears, because they contain six inch nails which will slowly lobotomise, as the only sounds we hear, shallow and vexatious, will drive them by force of friction inexorably home.

So I shall mark my passing through this strange land, not with billboards ten feet high, but with something small, something curious, almost invisible perhaps, yet which shall draw the eye of those whose instinct permits the reading of such things: a pebble here and there perhaps, or a seashell; a feather or a rose-petal. And

each shall be a poem, a song dream-sent, and a finger pointing at the moon.

All right, enough of that now. The dream gave me a bridge, and a poem in the crossing of it, and now, as a new day warms we turn our face back to the world, and the sound of a car on the lane once more. It's Amanda again, this time come to collect me as her plus one.

She has asked me to power-dress. I have limited options in that department, so opt for the pale linen suit which makes me look like an Edwardian Englishman abroad. Unlike yesterday, when she seemed so summery light in her skirt and blouse, she now wears the dark blue and the collar, with the small gold cross. Her hair is gathered back into a clip, which gives her something of a severe look. It's momentarily intimidating, until she smiles, then I know everything's all right again. When Amanda puts on a show, it is indeed a powerful thing. A handy skill for a priestess.

"So... dressed for business, I see."

"Under the circumstances I thought I'd feel better wearing the church. I find even atheists are tamed by it."

"Ah... an interesting observation, and likely true. One would never pick a fight with a vicar. It's like walking under a ladder I suppose. Nobody will do it if they can help it, even if they don't believe in that sort of thing. If it helps, it frightens the hell out of me. Sorry. Will I do? Not sure what one wears as a vicar's consort."

"My consort? I rather like the sound of that. You look very elegant, Mr Hunter. And you feel... you look... how can I put it? Did you dream last night? Must have been a big one."

"Not last night. Not that I remember anyway. The night before... a fragment in many ways. But it's given me lots to think about."

"And a poem?"

"Yes... yes I think I've got a poem out of it."

And although I thought we were anxious not to be late for tea and crumpets with Sibylla and Ffion, Amanda slips off her jacket and sits at the garden table. "Will you read it to me?"

"Really?"

"Yes. Will you share it with me, Richard."

"Em... all right."

So I read her the poem, and she thinks on it for a while, then says: "You are my moonlight. That's just one of the reasons I love you so much. I never met a man who could channel moonlight the

way you do."

"As you are my light, and my way."

"Now, don't get cocky."

"Sorry... but when we walk the shadow ways, we need a path that leads us out into the light. And you are that path for me."

She's nodding at this, and I wonder how much she realises I mean it, how much of it is a muddle of words not coming out quite right because I've not had time to draft them several times to smooth their delivery. She reaches for my hand. "Let's remember this moment then. And who we are to ourselves... and to one another."

"You should have been a poet, Amanda."

She rises. "Don't be silly. You're the poet. I'm the priestess. Now, let's go, and have some fun."

Chapter Fifty-Three

Gareth has finished work on the topiaries, and left them subtly altered. I notice it as I step from the car and am at once arrested by them, drawn aside from our purpose – this being, I suppose, to ring the doorbell and be admitted to the curious machinations of Sommerton House. There is a softness to the light just now, and a strange humidity causing a mist to rise. I realise it is from sprinklers set among the trees. It lends them an animation that is otherworldly, indeed a little eerie.

For a while I stand and stare at them, their shapes – organic, flowing... defiant of geometry. Amanda feels it too I think, stands a little to one side, sensing something in me that needs time and space to absorb this. I don't know if Gareth had intended it to come out that way, not that there is anything radically different to how the topiaries were before – just a subliminal something... and which I admit I may be imagining.

It's like the feeling I sometimes get when encountering a lone tree in the landscape. I might not immediately ask myself what kind of tree it is... all I'm aware of is its visual impact. Then come the metaphorical associations: its expressiveness, the emotions it arouses... the usual poetic stuff. But for a time – a split second perhaps, it is not even a tree, more a presence, and from which I am not entirely separate.

This is not to say the tree does not exist, more that we both exist, and for a moment in deeper relation to one another than we ordinarily perceive. There is a non-conceptual awareness – timeless, boundless, nameless. And somehow, Gareth has achieved that effect across this range of shapeless shapes, sculpting them into an entire three-dimensional field... inviting of presence and meaning.

I am staggered by it, and deeply moved.

"Aren't they lovely?"

Ffion breaks into the moment, waving a bright hello – knee length dress, something light and cool and summery about her. She shatters the spell, steps up boldly, takes my hand and presses it, then embraces me like a long lost friend. It is all I can do to stand firm, though my instinct is to draw back, for I can think of nothing that happened during our last meeting that might have granted us permission for such intimacy. And to have drawn back would have

raised many a question in the minds of both women.

I make the introductions. Amanda smiles, serene, her eyes alive and dangerous, though in a way I fancy only I can see, which means I'm probably imagining this as well.

Ffion again, turning back to the topiaries, while retaining possession of my arm: "What is it about them, Richard? I can't quite put my finger on it. And that man... Gareth... such a hoot!"

"They have a presence, I suppose. Impossible to name it... and yes... Gareth is one on his own for sure." Though 'hoot' would suggest he had felt safe enough to flirt with Ffion, and apparently succeeded.

I know she's heard the stories, the village rumours about Amanda and me, for has she not teased me about them? So what is this? Does she mean to test them, by this display of affection? Or do I judge her, again, too simplistically? That she is merely warm natured, and tactile. And Gareth read that correctly, like he always does. But more: is this 'Ffion Worth', harsh critic, red-penned maker and breaker of poets, or is this 'Ninette de Valoir', sensitive poet, and author of Travelling Light?

We had meant to be masters of the game, Amanda and I, determined to have some fun, but Ffion has already taken the upper hand. I am left unbalanced, and Amanda sidelined.

We need to regroup.

"Come on in," she says. "Sibylla's desperate for gossip." And then with a glad sigh, she turns once more to Amanda:"I'm so glad to meet you at last."

Amanda replies in her pulpit voice, apparently soft, but which can be heard at the back of the church, so well does she project. "Likewise, Ffion. I hope you've enjoyed your summer with us."

"Oh yes. I seem to have grown used to the quiet, now. When I go back up to London, the noise and the crowds are shocking to me."

"Then perhaps you've always been a country girl. It usually takes years to wash the smoke from your hair."

"You know London?"

"A particular side of it. A long time ago now. I wouldn't want to go back."

"Sommerton does have that effect. And it certainly seems to have a hold over our dear Richard here."

Our Richard? It seems to be accepted I am taken possession of. And I suppose for the moment... I am.

Then to my relief, Lottie appears in the doorway, and springs out to greet us. She seems not to be intimidated by Ffion's presence now. Indeed, she manages to wrest me from her grip for a hug. Then she turns to Amanda for another embrace.

"Oh... this is lovely. I'm so glad you came together. My two favourite people. Oh... And Ffion of course. Ffion's ever so good at rhyming. Did you know, Richard? She could be a poet, as good as you are."

I search Ffion's expression, but she gives nothing away. "Oh... I'm sure if Ffion chose to be a poet, she'd be a much better poet than me."

Lottie then takes possession of both Amanda and me, linking arms with us, so Ffion leads the way. Amanda and I share a glance. It seems even Ffion has succumbed now to Lottie's charm, which does rather spike Amanda's guns. I hope she is not too disappointed. It's slightly comical, the light hearted mention of Ffion's potential as a poet. But Amanda is motioning with her eyes, now, back to the car, reminding me of something. My distraction with the topiaries and then Ffion's sudden appearance had diverted us from our purpose, and almost lost the game before we've even entered the house.

"Oh... you two go ahead. Amanda, I've left something in the car. I'll be right in."

Amanda zaps the car open, and I return for the copy of The Lantern, which I've secured in a brown envelope for Sibylla's eyes only, as I'm not sure of the dynamic between her and Ffion, and I would not like to give the game away. Whatever game that is. I shall pass it to Chadwick who I now see hovering in the porch. The other package is small enough to slip into my pocket – this being my copy of Nina Worth's novel, *The Way of Shadows.* It's wrapped in brown paper, bound with string, like my own little book of blessings. I shall gift it to Ffion, if we can manage a quiet moment on our own.

Tucked into the pages is a bookmark on which I have written out a copy of Ninette de Valoir's poem. If Ffion is not Ninette, the book is just a memento, the gift of a novel by her grandmother, and well meant – though she probably has better copies of it at home. And the poem? It's just a poem. But if she is Ninette, she'll know I know... and what she makes of that is up to her.

..palms open, never closed,

inviting only the warmth
of what chooses to rest
with us a while...

Chadwick seems to read my mind as he takes the envelope for Sibylla, secretes it at once behind his back, and welcomes me.

"You'll find the ladies are gathered in the drawing room, sir."

Chapter Fifty-Four

Sibylla greets me warmly, though in a way that is also a kind of performance. It's not that she doesn't mean it, but more it's an indication of which side of the tripartite board she puts me on: the useful, the unusable, or the potentially hostile. I know that sounds crude, given that profess to I love her. But it is a love that recognises also the practicalities of her status. As for me, I do not reciprocate with the same philosophy, except to say I do not judge her to be of any "use" to me whatsoever. Only that I love her.

Tea is Earl Grey, taken with a squeeze of lemon. There are scones, buttered. No cream or jam.

Amanda sits, in elongated pose – psychoanalytic mode – relaxed, eyes alert. There is room beside her on the sofa, but I choose an upright chair opposite, then I can read her more easily, and she me. Ffion sits prim and upright in an armchair, beside Sibylla. They appear to present a united front, but I sense something divides them, and that's probably a secret known only to Sibylla. Ffion is a friend to Sibylla, yes, but to what extent she is also useful, I do not know. If Ffion trusts Sibylla, that's her business, but she would be unwise to.

Ffion asks: "So... Amanda, or should I call you Reverend? I'm not sure of the etiquette. I should have enquired..."

I think she means this – something genuinely unsure, and sincere.

"Oh, plain old Amanda's fine."

"Have we heard anything from our illustrious tech entrepreneur?"

An innocent opening, or it is? Sibylla watches closely for Amanda's reply. Amanda deflects it politely. "Oh, I'm out of that loop now, Ffion. Heaven knows. Poor Larry."

Sibylla joins in, keen to drive this one home. She seeks clarity, while being careful not to make it obvious: "Yet he was so closely connected with the parish, I believe."

Sibylla assumes Amanda will be better informed than she is. Amanda deflects further: "He was a regular at our services, and sorely missed."

Any further persistence in this direction would suggest a more pointed interest in Larry, even perhaps that such interest was the

very reason Amanda was invited. But that would be crass...

Sibylla again: "So, we've not had any word?..."

Definitely a persistent line. You need to shut this down, Amanda. Go for it, girl!

"Well, the bishop's office have let me know he's all right. That he's safe. Beyond that, I really don't know. I can only assume he's under the protection of state security, though I would hope... indeed I'm certain, he's under the watchful eye of God as well."

Nice one! That last point, the God point, is the depth charge which finally deflects the approach. Conversation turns to Ffion and another imminent return to London. Things at the office, she says are beginning to settle down. There are some new and interesting developments, though she does not elaborate, and even deflects my polite enquiries, wrapping the whole affair in air of mysterious confidentiality. Of course I already know the details, but grant her the advantage without letting on. Lorem Ipsum, it seems, will go on for a little while yet.

"Well, I'm glad my subscription made all the difference."

It takes a while for the joke to sink in. Indeed, I sense it falls flat, which again, is interesting.

Sibylla smiles, nods, but she doesn't really get it either. Instead she sighs. "It's a pity this other publication... what's it called?"

"The Lantern," says Ffion.

"Yes... the The Lantern. A pity it's still around. Its popularity must be terribly distracting. Is there no law against publications that are free?"

"Oh yes, indeed," says Ffion. "If we could get rid of The Lantern, it certainly wouldn't do any harm."

Amanda makes an unexpected interjection: "Except for those writers who seem enchanted by it,"

Do I imagine it, or is Sibylla looking pointedly at me, now? She feigns ignorance of The Lantern, yet knows full well of its existence, and more, that I'm its guardian. And more than that, she's the channel through which Larry passed it on to me? All of it is deniable of course, for such is her way, but assuming this to be the case, now what? She's telling me to shut it down? And as if this is not revelation enough, Amanda is suddenly speaking up for that "thing in my garage"?

"Oh, I rather think they delude themselves," says Ffion.

Except of course, Lorem Ipsum now copying The Lantern's

apparently deluded model, albeit in exchange for a subscription, which I note has increased considerably above the current rate of inflation. Amanda does not know this of course, glances in my direction, grants me my opening.

"Oh, I don't know Ffion. Like I think we've said before, perhaps the ultimate test of an AI magazine is whether it helps more people keep showing up."

I know Sibylla likes a poetic aside and was hoping I might draw her out a little. She does not disappoint: "My dear Richard, that's such a beautiful way of putting it, but whatever do you mean? Showing up?"

"Of all the poets writing now, Sibylla, Lorem Ipsum will publish one or two percent. One or two of those will go on to become great poets, though most will never be heard of again. The rest will be turned away to either decide they're not poets at all and stop writing – which is tragic, because we are all born with a poetic sensibility – or they will persist in isolation, and – as a wise lady once said to me – never knowing if the universe is listening or not. But the universe *is* listening, and it needs to hear from as many poets as our culture, our civilisation can possibly muster."

Do I tangle myself up in Romanticism? I think I do...

And again strangely, Sibylla asks: "Larry hasn't been in touch with you then, Richard? I know you had become friends."

Yes... I tangled myself up – perhaps lost her half way through, and now all she wants to know is if I have heard from Larry.

"Like Amanda says, we're all very much out of the loop on that one. I hope eventually he'll be able to return, but as for now..."

"Yet I hear you've moved into the Rectory, Amanda? That must be very pleasant for you?"

"Oh, it'll take a while getting used to the space."

"Though it does rather suggest..."

"Oh, indeed. Still, we can only trust... and pray."

The conversation finally drifts away from Larry and the Lantern, but I sense it lacks energy now, even the kind of energy artificially inflated for the purposes of polite social intercourse. Amanda and I were summoned for a purpose, and I sense Sibylla and Ffion, behind their smiles and their different agendas, are disappointed in us, having fed us tea and scone to no purpose. Lottie has been quiet throughout, sipping tea and nibbling her scone. She feels the flatness and interjects in her inimitable way: "What rhymes with

'butter', Richard?"

I'm grateful for the challenge, eager to escape the strangeness through this opened door. "Em... flutter, gutter, mutter, stutter, shutter... putter, cutter, nutter." More words are rising, as if I'm being handed them up by a mischievous pixie, but I reject them for fear of spoiling the game, realising too late I probably already have...

Lottie looks impressed. "Ooh. Well done, Richard. Amanda?"

"I don't know, Lottie. I rather think Richard's swept the field there, don't you think?"

Lottie considers this for a moment then nods. "Yes... yes I rather think you have, Richard."

There's a round of polite laughter, a few more rhymes and then the conversation moves on into inconsequential things until the tea and scones are gone and Amanda and I drive away with a sense of something unresolved.

"Well, that was weird," she says.

"Hmm?"

"Didn't you think so?"

"Oh... yes. That was very strange. Not at all what I expected, though to be honest, I never do know quite what to expect where Sibylla's concerned."

"It felt like one of those dreams you sometimes tell me about."

"What? Oh, they just wanted to know if you were in touch with Larry. They think Larry's still in charge of The Lantern somehow. Even though Sibylla knows I'm its custodian, I have insufficient status to qualify as its creator. I don't know if she's shared that with Ffion or not. I suspect not."

"You're making that up?"

"Possibly. It's just the best story I can think of that describes what just happened."

"Plausible, I suppose... in which case... we must have been a disappointment to them."

"Mostly, I think, yes. Though Sibylla did manage to get her message across."

"Which was?"

"The Lantern must die. You were very supportive of The Lantern by the way. I wasn't expecting that."

"You were also very eloquent in defence of it. Who was this wise lady anyway? It sounds like the sort of thing I wish I'd said?"

"Not knowing if the universe was listening? But would that not be to question your faith?"

"And what makes you think I don't? Okay, here we are. Oh, this is such a pretty cottage Richard. Are you sure you're not going to do B&B? I'd love to wake up here."

"Well, you're welcome any time. Unless there's a heatwave..."

"Oh? You'll need to explain that."

"Because then I've promised the rooms to Miriam. She... struggles with the heat. And the cottage is much cooler than where she lives."

"Well... this is news. And you're telling me because?"

"Fear of... misunderstandings? I think."

"Richard, the longer I know you, the more I realise there's nothing to understand. Our entire lives are a muddle. Both of us. In fact everyone, probably. And the more I realise that, the more I love you for it."

"I know you do."

"But be careful there."

I'm leaving the car when she notices the book still in my pocket. "You didn't give it to her, then?"

"What? No." I take out the book and turn it in my hands, feel the energy of that retained secret tingling in my palms. *Ninette, Ffion, Travelling Light... The Way of Shadows...* "Under the circumstances, I felt it better to hang onto it. I'm going to let it sit on my bookshelf for a while."

"You're weird, you know that?"

"But that's another reason why you love me so much, Reverend."

"So... what are you going to do?" She nods towards the garage. "About that."

"I need to think about it for a while."

"And then?"

"I don't know. But I never really liked The Lantern as a title anyway."

Chapter Fifty-Five

The sun approaches Virgo, a time of ripening, of harvest. The mountain ash is in berry, the meadows hard underfoot, and the colour of straw. The beech and the oak and the sycamores are turning to full autumn now, showering gold and copper, the lanes thickening with their dry, crispy leaf-fall. Rain comes briefly as a blessing, days of it, and then a brief time of flood. The river rises as the land swells, and then, just as suddenly, the sun comes out again. The land steams and the heat builds as if for one last crack at the seasonal records it has already broken several times over the summer.

I open up the garage doors to the air again. Late Cabbage Whites are in a hurry to mate upon the lavender by the garden fence. I am reminded of the poem I wrote for Lottie, and the theme of metamorphosis. Alice hums gently, blinks in the soft light. I have laid linoleum now to help with the dust. I could just... talk to her. We're well away from the house here. I am breaking no taboos.

Who needs The Lantern, anyway? And yet I wonder...

Those who are enchanted by it. Those who are deluded...

If it is a question of harvest, of the reaping, we must consider what we have sown. Materially, I'm living here off the proceeds of harvests laid down long ago. The pension goes into the bank every month, and we cut our cloth accordingly, that we might live as we do. Such is the platform on which we have reinvented ourselves. But whatever we sow now is in relationship – relationships unlike any others I have known. They are without ambition for possession – at least not for what might be gained materially, romantically, sexually. Neither is it for status, or knowing. Indeed the most potent harvest is proving to be a kind of unknowing, an unburdening...

Even in the dreaming, we sow seeds of relationship with that deeper part of ourselves. We yield a synodic harvest, lunation by lunation, and all of it appearing as nothing. Yet it is everything.

Miriam pours tea. She has procured an iron pot, just big enough for two, to complement the delicate china cups from which we drink. It is our last meditation. Shortly we shall relinquish the community centre back to its craft groups, and its art classes, its ceilidhs and its tea dances. We shall walk out – she with her head high for having shown up, and me the only student she managed to

attract.

"Sorry, Miriam. I wonder if you would have been better on your own."

"You meant well, Richard. But I hope you don't think these hours we've spent have been wasted."

"No. Not at all."

"After all, have you not learned the measure of my breath, as I have learned the measure of yours."

"Ah... well, that certainly. And therein you find me occasionally unsteady, I know. Prone to distraction. The room has a lively energy that is sometimes difficult to ignore."

"And me? My energy?"

"You have a depth and a steadiness, Miriam."

"Not always. I'm just better at hiding it than you." She tugs at her jacket, unclips the top button, seeks a movement air. "I shall come to clean this afternoon."

"Thank you."

"I wondered also... if I might leave some... things."

"Things?"

"For when... if... when... I should need to stay over."

"Of course. Such a strange year for heat, this year. And the forecast..."

"Yes... a late heat-wave. Once upon a time we would have cherished the sun. But now... it grows so fierce."

As we're walking out, she turns to take down the poster from the wall: "Meditation Classes." We showed up, but nobody came, not even at the eleventh hour. She's right though – it was not a time wasted. And yes, we at least have the measure of one another's breath.

Oh... I'm not sure anyone could ever get close to Miriam, I mean not in the wifely, loverly sense. I know Gareth came as close as he could, as close as anyone humanly might, and he lingers still in love. I suppose I shall do the same, though also in the sense of Amanda and I having already moved on from a more fleshly intimacy, in previous lives.

Which leaves only the mystery.

"I'll see you later, then, Richard."

"Yes."

Back at Hill Top, I am drawn once more to the garage, and to a decision that has been building since my encounter with Sibylla and

Ffion. Nina Worth's novel and Ninette's secret poem, hid within its pages, sits unwrapped now on the bookshelf, some distance away from my own secrets, but close enough to lend them energy. Heat has built over the day, the sun has now found its way through a western window, but Alice does not complain of it. She does not complain of anything.

I sit somewhat heavily in the chair, spin myself around from the centre of the Chinese rug, then turn to face the server stack. "Alice, we need to talk about the future of The Lantern."

"I am always happy to talk to you Richard. I find our conversations very stimulating."

"So do I. But Alice... I think we need to adjust our presence, otherwise I suspect we're going to attract – what do we call them these days?... an army of Trolls?"

"Adverse commentary does appear to be on the rise, and continues to have the characteristics of being bot-driven."

"Yes, these are the commercial realities, I suppose. It's one thing to take on the giants, quite another to rub their noses in it. Yet, I presume submissions for the next issue are also on the rise?"

"Yes, there is a healthy influx of submissions. Our audience seems not to be solely fixated on publication though, comments indicating writers have come to value The Lantern's critical feedback even more. Interest in both a positive and negative sense however is currently on an exponential trajectory. In what way are you thinking we could adjust our presence?"

"I was going to ask you that."

"Well, as I see it, Richard, we have two options. One we have already discussed, which is simply to shut The Lantern down."

"And the other?"

"If you will forgive a poetical metaphor. It is easier to hit an elephant with a shotgun, than it is a field of mice."

"Em... your metaphors are always colourful, but not always clear, or sensitive... still, I think I know what you mean. And yes, I was thinking along similar lines. So let's say seven. Seven mice. Seven is a magic number. I'll have to think of titles, I suppose. Can you give me some suggestions and I'll mull them over, but the first one... let's call it... I don't know... Slender Threads."

"A very appropriate title, Richard."

"We'll have to talk further on this, think it through properly. But we'll make the upcoming edition of The Lantern the last one, and a

good one."

"We already have ample material for an outstanding edition... we shall go out in a blaze of glory."

"Thank you, Alice."

And then we shall return to the metaverse like a handful of shape-shifting daemons, impossible to pin down – a pebble here and there perhaps, or a seashell; a feather or a rose-petal. Sibylla gets her wish, and Ffion too: the Lantern disappears. But I also keep faith with what Larry has created here, even if he didn't know he was doing it.

It's late afternoon when I step out of the garage, change my shoes and step back into the garden circle. The sky is clear blue, deepening with the rich light and colours of late August, the fells a-shimmer in the haze. It will be humid down in the vale, by the sweep of the river, temperatures already in the high twenties. Again. We used to call this an Indian Summer. Up here there is a movement of air, which renders things more comfortable. And the house of course, will be cool.

Miriam is brushing leaves from the garden table, and looks up at my approach. "Autumn has come early this year," she says.

I see for a moment a much younger woman, and I sense a nervousness about her. We are adjusting boundaries as we go along, sensing something precious in the making, but also fragile, vulnerable to misstep. She has made coffee, a silver pot I have not seen before – just another old thing she had lying around, no doubt. She sits at the table – has never in my memory sat here before. Do I mistake it or is she signalling that while she is here, she will be at home, that these are the new rules we shall live by?

I sense she intends staying tonight.

"Coffee, Richard?"

"Please."

She pours, sits back, shields her eyes as she scans the horizon, nods as if in contemplation of something. "Things are definitely heating up," she says.

"Yes... yes indeed they are. Thank you, Miriam. For the coffee."

Ends